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Trouble IS A WOMAN

by FRANCIS FLICK

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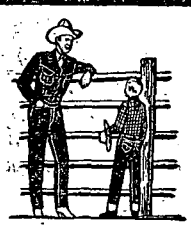

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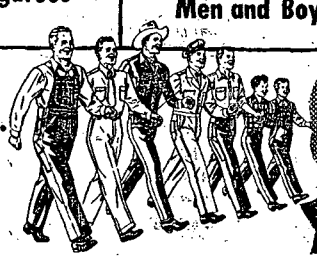

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LOVE SHORT STORIES

Vol. 32, No. 1 September, 1950

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Love Short 'n Sweet

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading the feature on handwriting. It was very interesting, and I enjoyed it more than anything else. I am sending a sample of my husband's writing, my mother-in-law's and this letter of my own to be analyzed. I have read many articles on handwriting, but this is one of the easiest to understand, and the clearest. . . .

Mrs. Edward Eldar
Oregon

Dear Editor:

I have been reading *Love Short Stories* for as long as I can remember. I usually enjoy all the stories, but the section I like best is Character Inklings. I have tried comparing my writing to the samples given, but so far haven't been able to match it. Now I'm going to do something I've wanted to do for a long time—send a sample of it to Scott Carter to be analyzed.

Rosalynd Karsh
Canada

These are just two of the very many letters we've been getting complimenting us—and Scott Carter—on the Character Inklings. Makes us feel very happy to know that so many of you like it.

Dear Editor:

I've just this minute finished reading the August issue of *Love Short Stories*. Liked most of the stories, but one of the best and funniest I've ever read is Rhoda Hall's *Laurie On a Lark*. You know, it's

(Please turn to page 8)

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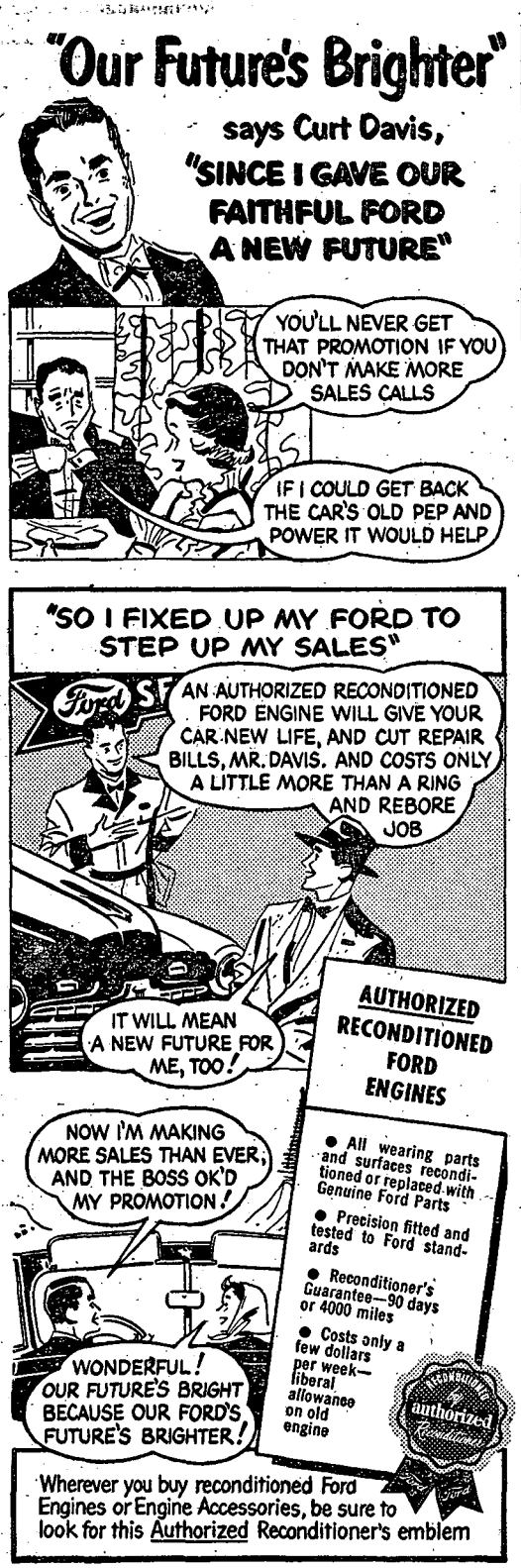
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(Continued from page 6)

really refreshing to find such amusing treatment of the old theme of how to get your man—and keep him! Hoping for more of the same, soon.

Mary Louise Archer
Arkansas

Dear Editor:

The August issue was up to all the usual *Love Short Stories* standard—but I have a question about one of the stories in that issue. It was Shelby Steger's story, *Love Me Later*—the one about the love magazine. What I want to know—is it really like that in the offices where you put out this magazine? Life is pretty dull around these parts, and if I could get a job working with one handsome author—let alone, two!—I'd have a feeling I wouldn't have to go to the movies for fun and excitement.

Susie Cothem
Nebraska

Well, Susie, I don't know about other magazine offices—but ours isn't quite like that. Besides, all the handsome authors we know are married, and never hire secretaries! Truth is stranger than fiction, though, and who knows, maybe somewhere there is a pair like Miss Steger describes in her story.

Dear Editor:

I think your Pen Pal column is a very nice idea. I have just become a reader of *Love Short Stories* and I had to tell you how much I like it. There are so many lonesome people in the world and if there is some way to make them a little happier, then it's a blessing. Corresponding is almost as good as the real thing.

Mrs. John Harrow
Florida

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. . . . who is beautiful, talented, and loved by too many men.

Trouble Is a Woman

By FRANCIS FLICK

IT WAS quiet in the *Evanstown Weekly Sentinel* office tonight. Bill was hunched over his battered typewriter, his black hair was tousled and his gray eyes narrowed in concentration as he banged out his editorial for Friday's paper. This one was going to be another scorcher. He grinned sardonically at the thought.

The shrill high whine of the factory whistle hit the *Sentinel* office with sudden, chilling impact. Its whine at night meant catastrophe. Meant men would pour out from the fashionable Bluff and up from the dregs of Shantytown to offer their help, bound together in disaster. Bill was on his way before the whistle's first blast had ended; he hit the street running.

Crimson flames shot high into the sky,

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"You mustn't love me, Bill," she said. "It isn't any good."

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their yellow tongues licking avidly at new places to devour. A car slowed and pulled toward the curb. "Bill!" the driver yelled and he leaped on the running board. "It's Shantytown, burning like hell."

"Yeah," Bill answered, his eyes fixed ahead on the flaming sky. For months he had hammered about the disgrace of Shantytown squatting in the mud flats; he'd given concrete examples of why the Health Department should condemn its shameful living conditions and why the Police should close its crime breeding gambling joints. His editorials had had about as much effect upon the Town Fathers as a kid attacking Stalingrad with a pea-shooter. Evanstown possessed a great pride and what it couldn't admire about itself, it ignored.

State street was jammed now with cars and running men; a red fire truck clanged past and the police car with the Chief, grim faced and taut, cut around them. Before they reached the Flats they heard the crackling of the fire and heard the crash of gutted walls. And old warehouse, on the right, was illuminated as though by a million watts, before its roof caved in.

"Thanks," Bill shouted and jumped off the car. His shoes sucked into the mud and made a squishy sound as he tried to hurry. Little groups of frightened women, with children clinging to them, stood staring, white faced, at the burning ruins of their homes.

Now, what would the town do, Bill wondered grimly, for these homeless people? For years it had let them live like pigs on a mud bank, ignoring the blight upon the beauty and conscience of the town.

Fire hoses played their steady streams of water on the burning shacks and gradually the holocaust abated into charred and smoking ruins. Another police car slithered to a stop in the mud and Bill watched the men rush toward one of the smoking shacks. That meant the Chief was there. Bill moved on after them.

A girl stood on a rickety foot bridge, spanning an open sewer, one hand clasped on the rail. She was tall and very slender, her back beautifully straight. There was only one girl in the world with a back like hers, and Bill involuntarily slowed, his lean jaw tightening.

She half turned, her lovely profile silhouetted against the flickering kerosine lanterns, and Bill felt a band of cold steel slam against his chest, making it difficult to breathe. Six wasted lousy months, he thought bitterly, in trying to forget. All the loneliness, the ache had gone for nothing. Seeing her now brought it all back and he knew, with terrible certainty, that he had never stopped loving her. And never would.

"Hello, Karen," he said quietly.

SHE whirled and he heard her catch her breath. Her hair was just as red, her eyes as green, and she was so beautiful it hurt.

"What about your uncle, Karen? He didn't get caught in this fire, did he?"

"Yes, he did," she answered flatly, no emotion, nothing in her lovely voice. "I haven't seen him, but Chief Simpson says the smoke killed him." She didn't add that old Jed Malloy had been probably too drunk to even know there had been a fire raging about him. She didn't need to add it. Long ago the town had nicknamed him "Jug."

When Karen had been just a spindly legged kid her father and mother died in an automobile wreck and, grudgingly, old Jug had taken her into his shack in Shantytown. She'd been startlingly beautiful even then, and in high school the boys, from Evanstown's best families on the Bluff, began hovering around her like flies around a honey pot. She struck terror into the deep bosoms of the best families and, in retaliation, they forbade

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their children to have anything to do with "that Malloy girl."

Karen was never invited to the little kid birthday parties; never met the gang for a coke at the Spa on State Street; never had a date for the graduation dance. She was always alone. She lived within herself, hiding her hurt, with a dirty old man whose only interests were rare coin catalogues and whisky. And she learned to hate the town with bitterness and intensity. She was determined to lift herself out of the squalor in which she lived and make the town respect her and her voice.

A year ago, Bill had come back to the town where he had been born and bought the weekly paper. He found Karen on a rainy afternoon down near the Flats and they had talked and laughed a little. She had been coming home from a voice lesson, lessons she had paid for with money earned waiting on table in a cheap cafe.

He looked down at her now, and supposed it must have been that rainy afternoon that he fell in love with her. He wondered what afternoon Vic Lawton had fallen in love with her, and could still feel the jealousy bite into him, just as real as it had been then.

Six months later, just before she left for New York to battle her way into a singing job, he had begged her to stay and marry him. Her beautiful mouth had tightened and her face had paled. "It's your town, Bill," she'd said. "You came back to it because you love it. I hate its guts and it hates mine. They'd never, never accept 'that Malloy girl' as your wife." She had hesitated, then added, "Or as Vic's wife. You see, Bill, you've never been snubbed and hurt, nor has Vic."

Bill had argued, he had pleaded, and she had only laughed. Laughter that had twisted his heart. He looked down at her now, intently.

"Still got that singing job in New York? The Blue Moon, isn't it?" he asked evenly.

She smiled and her slim shoulders straightened proudly. "I just finished my contract there. My agent says I'm being offered a contract in two weeks at the Copa. I guess, Bill, I'm arriving."

And that meant she was that much further away from him, but he managed to put some eagerness into his voice. "I'm glad for you, Karen. I've got to find the Chief of Police; if you want to wait, I'll get you a ride back to town."

"I'll walk to the hotel, thanks. Will you have time to come by and tell me about my uncle?" Her hand on the rail of the footbridge tightened. "I can't pretend that I care very much about him, Bill, but I'm sorry he had to die like this."

"Smoke isn't good, I know." He put his hand over hers and felt the touch of her tingle through him. How big a damn fool can a man be? "I'll call you from the lobby later."

A GROUP of burned out men stopped him and asked where they could go for the night. Sad faced men; wretched and afraid. Before he could answer, a kid ran up and told them that Capper was opening the recreation rooms in his factory for them. The floor, Bill thought, would get hard before morning.

One of the cops peered at him in front of Jug Malloy's shack, recognized him, and let him go on in. From the two kerosene lanterns Bill could see that the place had been badly burned in spots, part of the walls were gone and some of the floor. Old Jug lay sprawled on his back by the window, very dead.

Chief of Police Simpson looked up and glared at Bill. He was a lanky man with a thin, hawk face and piercing blue eyes. "I ought to throw you out of here, for the things you wrote about me and my department. Damn it, we *couldn't* keep the joints closed down here. We closed

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one and before we could get back to headquarters another opened up. Like rats finding a new cellar."

Bill knew he wasn't expected to make any answer; it was just the Chief letting off more steam about his blazing editorials. He stared down at Jug, then around the room, "Chief, this place isn't nearly as burned as some up the other end. Was he too drunk to get out?"

The Chief's heavy brows twitched, "Not exactly. Look, Bill, this is nothing you can print, not one word of it. We don't want anyone to interfere with our investigation. It's off the record—ok?"

Bill looked at him quizzically. "Sure."

"Roll him over, boys." The Chief looked smug as the detectives turned Jug over. There, matted with dried blood, was a bullet hole in the head. Bill let out a long whistle. "Someone murdered the old bum," the Chief said evenly. "The fire started, Bill, at the other end of Shantytown, and we aren't too sure it wasn't set. Some of my boys are up there now with the Fire Chief. It swept on down to here, but by then the fire engines were here shooting water. Say, you were pretty friendly with Karen at one time, just before she left for New York." He paused a moment. "What's she doing down here tonight?"

The hot blood poured into Bill's lean face. "I only saw her for a minute, out on the footbridge. She's on a brief vacation before she finds out whether or not she goes into the Copa. I suppose she came back to find out how the old man was." He dragged out his crumpled pack of cigarettes and stuck one into his mouth. "What do you think she came back for?"

"Well what do you know," the Chief drawled. "She came back here to see her uncle. She pays him no mind for the last six months, then when this happens, guess who's right here?" His eyes were steady on Bill's.

"So, what if she was?" Bill demanded.

"So, nothing at all, son. Just nothing at all. But you're not to tell her one word about her uncle being murdered. Not one word." He grinned. "And when you meet her tonight at the hotel, please tell her I'll be seeing her in the morning."

For a minute Bill felt himself tense, then he slowly made himself relax. What was he sore about? Everyone in town knew he'd been in love with Karen and had lost out. Hell, he was the boy who should be writing all the torch songs.

He waited while they carried Jug out to the ambulance, then he asked the Police Chief, "Mind if I stay and look around a little?"

"No." The Chief walked toward the door. "Turn out the lanterns when you leave, Casanova. And you won't find any of Karen's letters tucked around." His eyes hardened. "Just empty envelopes with her return address in the corners. But if you should find anything, call me immediately."

"Sure," Bill said curtly and lit a cigarette. He took a long satisfying drag. Actually, he had no idea why he had stayed behind in this half burned-up shack. Maybe, he thought the old man might have left something to point a finger to his murderer. Nice wishful thinking for a newspaper man. It was nuts that anyone would take the trouble and the terrible risk, just to murder old Jug. He was just a drunk who had nothing, not often the price of rotgut.

Bill took another deep drag of his cigarette, his eyes carefully covering the one room. Afterward, he never knew what had made him stoop down to examine the partly burned floor, probably his private Leprechaun nudging his elbow. Because at the edge, where the fire had nibbled the floor, was a small compartment built under the flooring and Bill could see the strings of a yellow Bull Burham tobacco sack. He pulled it out and opened it. There were two old coins in it; one, an

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1812 half eagle, in mint condition, the other, a gold coin in excellent condition, about the size of a half dollar, made in the year 1786.

HE TURNED them slowly over in his fingers. Then shrugged, and replaced them in the sack. He reached back into Jug's cache, and pulled out a roll of twenty dollar bills that would choke a small mule. He whistled softly as he shoved the roll and the sack into his pants pocket. The motive for the murder of Jug must be robbery for money, since the coins probably weren't worth more than twenty or twenty-five dollars, if that.

Bill left the shack and pushed through the crowd of ogling, avid people hanging around the outside of the shacks. The Fire Chief was just getting into his bright red car and offiered Bill a lift back to town.

"Thanks," Bill said and climbed into the back seat. "Any chance, Chief, that this fire was set?"

After a brief hesitation, the Fire Chief turned his head to talk back over his shoulder to Bill, "I think so. From the description I got of the start of it. It went with the speed of kerosene. One man even said he saw a little puff of smoke before the first shack burst into flames. That's definitely a characteristic of kerosene."

"And most of them used kerosene lamps down here," Bill answered.

"Yep," the Fire Chief nodded. "That's the trouble. It makes it tough. Any dope down here could have set it, with kerosene. We aren't saying one single word about our suspicions, Bill. That's for you and the paper, too."

"Sure," he said. This was a newspaper man's dream tonight, all right. A murder he had to shut his mouth about and, now, arson he had to forget. Just dandy! The car slowed at the eight story modern hotel and Bill climbed out. "Thanks," he yelled as the car picked up speed once again.

The hotel had been done in soft grays highlighted with maroon leather chairs and couches. People were pushing into the bar and a few looked at Bill and smiled. He glanced up at the clock. It was ten-thirteen.

The pretty blonde at the desk perked up when he walked over to her. But, when he asked her to tell Miss Malloy that he was in the lobby, she stared up at him through heavily marscaraed lashes and sniffed audibly. Karen's fatal trouble in this town had always been her startling beauty and, as though that hadn't been enough, add to it her lovely low voice and you came up with bright green jealousy. With the town's dowagers it had produced fear that one of their sons would elope with her. It had been Vic Lawton's mother, though, the town's social arbiter, who had had to succumb to a series of heart attacks to tear Vic away from Karen and back under her thumb.

In a few minutes, Bill saw Karen step off the elevator. She wore a black pinched-in faille suit with short wide sleeves and winged pockets over her slender hips. Her red hair was parted in the middle and curled short in the back. There weren't any words to describe Karen. No words for her loveliness, Bill realized, and swallowed hard.

"Want a scotch and soda?" he asked huskily, his gray eyes looking deep into hers. After a minute, she dropped hers away and looked too carefully around the lobby.

"I don't think so, Bill, thanks. Couldn't we go over to that little couch in the corner?"

"Why not?" he walked beside her, close beside her, his arm touching hers. She came just about to his shoulder, the perfect height for his six-feet-one. He remembered the nights they had danced together, lost on a cloud of their own.

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Everything they had ever done together was all that mattered in his life, all that ever would.

He lit cigarettes for them and handed her one. He wished he weren't so conscious of her nearness, wished he didn't want so terribly to hold her in his arms. He'd been doing all right until he'd seen her again.

"MY UNCLE was killed by the smoke?" she asked quietly, her sea green eyes on his.

"Yes," he had to lie to her because he had his orders from Chief Simpson. Maybe Jug had always had the soiled tobacco sack around with his two old coins and he pulled it out of his pocket. "You ever see these?" He unfastened the sack and shook the two gold coins out into her hand.

She smiled a little sadly. "The eighteen-twelve eagle he's had since I was a kid. This," she touched the other, "I sent him three days ago."

"What is it," Bill asked curiously. "I know it's seventeen eighty-six, but I'm no numismatist." He smiled.

"Well, neither am I." She smiled back and it was lovely. "There was a sweet old gentleman who used to have dinner at the Blue Moon every night so he could hear me sing his favorite song. A Mr. Carrington who loved *Poor Butterfly* and, since he always sent twenty dollars to the orchestra leader, the boss had me sing it." She shook the two coins together in her closed hand. "When I was closing and my agent was signing me into the Copa in a couple of weeks, Mr. Carrington insisted that everyone drink champagne with him and he gave me his old gold coin as his congratulations."

"And you sent it to Uncle Jed," Bill smiled at her.

"That's right. About the only fun I ever saw him have was over an old coin catalogue, hunting for a dime that would pay off in dollars." She put the coins back in the sack. "I don't suppose this seventeen eighty-six coin is worth much, if anything." Her eyes widened. "I almost forgot. The day after I'd sent it to Uncle Jed some man telephoned me and asked if I had the gold coin that Mr. Carrington had given me, and if so, he'd like to buy it. I explained that I'd sent it up to my uncle and the man hung up."

"Did he make an actual offer, Karen?" Bill crushed out his cigarette in the gray and maroon ashtray.

"No, and he didn't sound as though he were particularly interested one way or the other. He said he was a dealer and had a client vaguely interested." She looked down at her fingers clasping the purse in her lap. "I'll stay for the funeral, of course. And, Bill, would you help me with the arrangements?"

He covered her hands with his. "I'll take care of everything and I'll let you know when it can be. Chief Simpson said to tell you he'd be around in the morning to talk to you."

"I'll wait for him." Her lovely low voice caught at him. "Bill, I'm so glad to see you again." That's all it took to churn up his foolish heart, knowing that she was going again, this time to the Copa in New York. Before he could speak, a voice cut through at them.

"Karen! Karen Malloy!" Faye Stewart stopped short before them with Vic Lawton right behind her. She stared at Karen as though she were a ghost. Faye was a pretty girl, not beautiful, but dainty and fragile, with midnight hair and an oval face. A member of one of Evanstown's oldest and most revered families, she lived in a big house on the Bluff with her mother and pinched the pennies hard. There had been a rumor that she had made the eligible and very rich Vic Lawton forget his infatuation for Karen and their engagement would soon be announced.

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"Hello, Faye," Karen said coolly, then turned the blaze of her charm on Vic. His response was instant and volcanic, he reached for her hand and his dark eyes took on a feverish glow. Maybe his mother's heart attacks had brought him back into the fold, but he hadn't forgotten Karen. Right now, it looked as though Faye's hearing the *Wedding March* was going to be deferred indefinitely.

Bill moved to Faye's side since both Karen and Vic were oblivious to them. "Did you go down to the fire?" he asked the first thing that popped into his head. He didn't want anyone to know that he was boiling inside, that he had an unreasoning impulse to smash Vic's white streak of a smile.

FAYE cleared her throat. "I was down at Shantytown earlier, before the fire." Her cultured voice didn't quite hide her own raging tumult. "I had a message for our washwoman. They say only Jug Malloy was killed."

"That's right." He dug out a pack of cigarettes and offered her one. Her hand was icy cold as she took it. He studied her as he held his lighter. She was too tight, worn thin with keeping up with an old tradition. If only, he thought, you could tear away the snobbery, the unreasoning cruelty of caste, you'd find such really wonderful people underneath.

"I'm very tired, so if you'll excuse me," Karen's low voice zinged through Bill. Just hearing her speak could do that to him. "Good night, Faye, and, Vic, I'll see you for lunch tomorrow." Karen smiled up at Vic and then permitted Bill to take her to the elevators.

"Faye's been going around with him, everywhere," Bill said curtly, his gray eyes cold with anger. "Did you have to make such a snatch for the guy?"

"Yes," she answered. "That girl was a brat to me all of my life. Even at ten she was an accomplished sadist. I owe her plenty of very bad moments." There was bitterness and hurt in her voice, an old hurt that had never quite gone away. "I always liked Vic." Her smile was enigmatic. "Once we almost eloped."

"Oh, fine," he growled. He looked down at her white face, "I think you only hate your home town so much because you love it. Good night." He bent and kissed her lightly on the lips. A faint pink brushed her lovely face and, for that instant, her green eyes misted.

Walking toward the bank of telephones, Bill saw Faye and Vic arguing violently. For once he and Faye were on the same side, he thought bitterly. He might as well get some information, if he could, on the 1786 gold coin Karen had sent to Jug, and he dialed Caleb Stone's number, the only numismatist whom he knew.

Caleb listened while he described the coin, then his jitters of excitement came right over the wires. It *could* be the Revere Doubloon made for the State of Pennsylvania in 1786. It was not minted because there were no mints until 1793. It was probably coined by the pressure molding process and its maker was a private goldsmith named Revere. It couldn't have been milled either, since there were no milling machines until 1787. If this were the gold Revere Doubloon, roughly equivalent to a twenty dollar gold piece in perfect condition, it was a very rare coin indeed and worth thousands of dollars. "Bring it to me," Caleb shouted. "Right now."

"I have to turn it over to Chief Simpson, but the police will bring it in to you first thing in the morning. And thanks, Caleb, a lot. Good night." Bill hung up slowly, a scowl cutting deep into his forehead. He'd been wrong in thinking this coin couldn't have been the motive for murdering old Jug. The twenty dollar bills he had found were chicken feed. He snapped his fingers in irritation—he had forgot to ask Karen how her uncle could

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have acquired a roll big enough to choke a jackass.

He went to the house phones and called her suite. Her thrilling voice sounded somehow hesitant, then changed with a note of gladness in it when she recognized his voice. "How would Jug ever get a fat roll of twenties, Karen?" he asked.

"Why," she laughed softly, "I suppose from me, Bill. Since I've been working in New York I've been sending him thirty dollars a week, at a considerable sacrifice, I might add. That's why I came home. I had a hunch he had not moved out of those filthy mud flats as I'd asked him to. I wanted him to live a little decently and have enough to eat."

"And you didn't even like him very much," he said and wanted to reach right over the phone and take her in his arms.

"Not much," she confessed. "But if he hadn't given me a corner of his hovel when I was a kid, it would have been even worse for me. I owed him that, Bill."

"I love you, Karen," he told her softly and hung up.

IF ONLY this fine old town would forget that she had been raised in Shantytown, forget how wonderously beautiful she was and give her a chance, they would discover how fine she was and how real a person. An idea thundered at him and he drew in a ragged breath. If the town, their town, could be made to somehow accept her, then he might have a chance. It might break her down and she would stay and let him love her for the rest of his life. Once, she had believed that she would ruin him if she stayed here and married him, that Evanstown would cold shoulder them both.

He went to the hotel desk and got a sheet of paper and an envelope. He scribbled a note to Police Chief Simpson explaining where he had found the two gold coins, and what Caleb Stone had said about the 1786 one. He suggested that the Chief send the Doubloon to Caleb in the morning. He added the stack of twenties to the Bull Durham tobacco sack and sealed them all in the envelope. He walked across to the bellboy captain and, for a crisp five dollar bill, the kid agreed to take it immediately to Police Headquarters.

State Street was still jumping with the catastrophe of the fire, the people were crowding into the Spa and hanging around the street corners discussing the tragedy. Bill hoped, grimly, that they were already figuring out a new decent housing project for their homeless poor staying tonight in Capper's recreation room in his factory. Then, he remembered his editorial had to be rewritten and he turned into the *Sentinel* office.

He loosened his tie and flung off his coat before he sat down at his battered typewriter. He jerked out the page he had half written, crumpled it into a ball and tossed it toward the wastebasket. He stared at the virgin sheet of paper and tried to think of a hot lead, but all he could see before him was a girl with red hair and lustrous green eyes. So beautiful it hurt.

Well, this couldn't go on. A man couldn't sit here and dream, while he wanted her until he ached. He was a fool and he began pounding out his editorial. It was going good and he was pouring it on for the town, when he heard a faint noise behind him. He started to turn—to late. Something smashed down on his head and blackness dropped over him.

Very slowly he opened his eyes. He reached out and found he was on the floor. Light sent searing pain through his eyes and he thought his skull was going to take off and fly. Someone slopped cold water over his face.

"Do you furnish water wings with that?" Bill asked weakly and managed a grin.

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"Son, are you all right?" Chief Simpson's face blurred like bad television and, then, righted itself.

"Sure. Help me up, Chief." The Chief and one of his detectives, Tony Marks, helped him. It was a bad mistake. For a minute Bill thought he would be violently sick and sweat stood out in beads on his forehead. "Cigarette might help." Tony put a lighted one in his mouth and he took a long deep drag while his stomach settled out of its contortions. "Thanks."

"What happened here, Bill?" the Chief demanded.

"Someone sneaked up behind me while I was writing my Friday editorial and wham. I didn't duck."

"See him?" Tony asked.

"See him!" Bill repeated in disgust. "Oh, sure, we sat this one out and held hands." He looked around his office and whistled. The place had been thoroughly ransacked. Files were half pulled out and their contents spilled on the floor, desk drawers had been dumped. "Hey," he yelled, "it will take the rest of my life to clean this one up. Why, that dirty—"

"What was he looking for, Bill?" Chief Simpson cut in.

"That old coin, the Revere Doubloon, I would guess. Probably he saw me find it in Jug's shack tonight. When I came out, a gang was milling around. I suppose I was tailed to the hotel, but what the joker didn't see was that I put it and the money in an envelope and sent it to you." The color drained out of his face and he jerked the telephone toward him and dialed the Evans Hotel. "Maybe he thinks Karen has the gold piece and the dough." He waited for her to answer and each minute seemed another thousand years. He knew definitely that he would kill anyone who harmed her, and it was like a reprieve when she finally answered.

"Karen," he asked gruffly, "you're all right?"

"Of course." She caught the tenseness in his voice and he heard her catch her breath. "Oh, Bill, are you all right?"

HE LET the sheer pleasure of her worry wash over him and warm him. "Sure. But someone came into the *Sentinel* and conked me on the back of the head. I think he was looking for that old coin you sent to Jug."

"But it can't be valuable, Bill." Her voice trembled a little and he hoped she was worried about him. He let himself bask in it a little, like a damn fool.

"It's worth thousands probably. Wait a minute." He put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Chief, the guy who came in here for that coin might go to Karen for it. She could get hurt. How about putting someone over there to kind of guard her?"

The Chief's heavy brows twitched and he said something that sounded like "Ugh." Finally he looked at Tony. "Get on over there."

Bill explained to Karen that Tony Marks was coming over to spend the rest of the night in her hall, just to be on the safe side. "Don't open your door for anyone unless Tony gives you the go ahead."

"I won't." She sounded just a little frightened. "And please be careful, Bill."

"Sure and good night, dear." He could feel his face flame at the Chief's derisive snort and leaned down and picked up a box of aspirin from the floor and chewed two.

There was a commotion outside the door and Tony came back in pushing Vic Lawton ahead of him. "Tony," the Chief barked, "*that's* Mr. Lawton." The Chief was a nice guy who had respect for the Evanstown National Bank.

Tony's dark face hardened, "I know that," he said doggedly. "But he was trying to sneak out of the print shop."

Vic pulled down his dinner jacket and straightened his black tie, then he smoothed his glistening blond hair. "I

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was waiting for you guys to leave so I could see Bill. And this, to be corny about it, is an outrage."

"Could be," the Chief told him laconically. "But could be, too, that it's odd you're hanging around here this time of night." He watched Vic stare in amazement at the tumble-jumble of the office. "Someone sneaked in here and hit Bill on the back of his head, knocked him out and searched the place. And then, Tony finds *you* hanging around."

Vic wet his lips. "I had a date tonight with Faye Stewart. Bill can tell you, we met him and Karen in the lobby of the Evans."

"Yeah," Bill affirmed their meeting gruffly. He could still remember Karen's too obvious interest in Vic.

"I think I best be perfectly frank, Chief." Vic smiled. "It's been no secret that Faye has never liked Karen and hasn't appreciated the fact that I always have." His eyes met Bill's steadily, challengingly, declaring himself in the race for Karen's heart. "After Faye and I met Karen and Bill, we had an argument as we left the hotel. Then, out at the Clover Inn, Faye suddenly decided she wanted to talk to Bill and insisted that I bring her back to town. I did and let her out here at the *Sentinel*. She asked me to go and leave her after we saw that Bill was in the office." He shrugged. "At least, the lights were on. I was sore so I drove off." He opened a thin gold cigarette case and selected a cigarette. "Afterward, I decided I'd been stuffy and came back here for her. I saw you, Chief, and thought I'd wait until you left. I wanted to ask Bill about Faye and who took her home."

"Didn't Miss Stewart tell you why she wanted to see Bill tonight?" the Chief barked, then noticed Tony. "Get going," he ordered and Tony reluctantly shoved off.

"I've found out, Chief, that it is best never to ask girls too many questions." Vic smiled faintly and blew a long plume of smoke.

"Yeah, I guess so," the Chief agreed. "Well, let's break this up for tonight." He sighed lustily. "It's a mess."

BELLS rang and clanged until, finally, Bill managed to open an eye. He grunted with the soreness at the back of his head. He pushed himself up in bed and gingerly felt the lump. The telephone blasted again and he reached for it. "Tyler, here." He yawned.

"Ho! Ho!" Chief Simpson laughed with diabolical satisfaction. "So I woke you. Good. I've been up since six and you lay there until ten minutes to nine. You young guys just can't take it. I'm on my way to the Stewarts about Faye's visit to you last night. Want me to pick you up in three minutes?"

"Make it five." Bill slammed down the phone and jumped. He was a little amused at himself when he pulled on the new gray slacks and shrugged into the too expensive gray-blue sports coat, finery he had been saving for some special occasion. Well, Karen was special enough for the white tie and tails, but he knew that no one in town would miss the new clothes today. He wondered again, as he ran down the broad mahogany staircase, if he had spent too much of his youth with his Navy father in far places to ever quite get the New England frame of mind in this town. Actually, he didn't think it mattered very much because people were people, underneath their trappings, no matter where you found them.

He opened his front door just as the Chief's car pulled to the curb and Sergeant Duffy chirped on the horn. The Chief's heavy eyebrows twitched, "Well, aren't you the bird of paradise? Tony reported that Karen is having breakfast with Vic Lawton." He pretended not to notice that Bill stiffened. "Get in, get in."

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Bill said nothing as they drove up the winding road. Karen had made a date with Vic for lunch today, but did this mean that she was taking all her meals with him? Questions darted at him, sharp little questions with poisoned arrows aimed at his heart.

They swept up the broad drive to the Stewart house, still replete with a tower, cupolas and huge bay windows. Nothing had changed, not since Faye's great-grandfather had built it.

Faye opened the door for them and frowned when she saw Bill. "I thought it was the *police* who wished to talk to me?" she sounded sulky. After a moment, she said, "Well, come in, please." She had dressed carefully in a becoming tangerine linen dress that reflected a little color in her pale face and contrasted nicely with her midnight hair.

The living room's fine oriental rugs were worn threadbare in places and the beautiful Sheraton couch needed recovering. They could use Vic Lawton's money but good. Then Bill wondered if now that Karen was back, would Faye ever get the chance. His own thoughts made him a little sick.

"Please sit down." She waved to some beautiful old Early American chairs and they sat down gingerly, hoping nothing would crash under them.

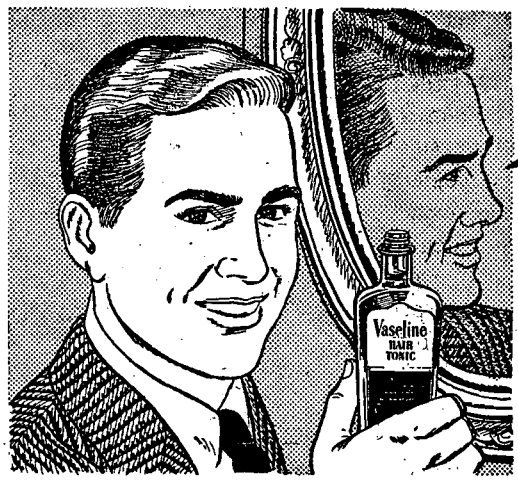
"Vic Lawton told us that you went to see Bill at the *Sentinel* last night, Miss Stewart." The Chief's voice was official as he plunged right in. "About that time, someone sneaked in and hit Bill over the back of his head, then searched his office. Did you hear, or see anyone?"

Her eyes got wide with surprise, "Of course not. I'm so sorry, Bill."

"He has a hard head," the Chief cut in, his face stern. "You're real sure, aren't you, Miss Stewart, that you didn't see anyone?"

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"



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Her dark brown eyes flashed angrily, "I've said so. If I had I should have screamed for help. And, anyway, I didn't go up stairs."

"Just why did you want to see Bill," the Chief demanded and leaned toward her.

"Let's say I had an impulse, then lost it." She stared back almost insolently at the Chief. The silence built until she smiled crookedly. "Let's say I decided I didn't wish to be mixed up with anything, or *anyone* raised in Shantytown. But, since you're here, I might as well tell you that I went down to the Flats last evening to tell our washwoman, Annie O'Brien, that we needed her today. I got there just before seven o'clock. After I located her and was getting back into my car, I saw Karen Malloy. She was at the upper end, away from Jug's shack, and she acted furtive somehow—as though she didn't want to be seen. Naturally after the place burned down, I remembered. That's where the fire started, wasn't it, Chief?" she asked innocently and Bill wanted to grab her and shake the truth out of her. She was lying, caring about nothing but to strike back at Karen. Something was all wrong about her story, something he knew and couldn't put his finger on.

After pulling his lower lip and worrying it around, the Chief squinted at Faye. "Why did you go to tell Bill this? Why not me?"

"BECAUSE Bill's in love with that, that Malloy girl." Her hatred oozed out through her words and was a naked ugly thing. "When he lived here with his grandmother, before he was quite old enough to go off with his father, we used to play together. He used to pull my pigtails." She smiled over at Bill, then dropped her eyes at the stoney hardness in his face. "For old times sake, I thought this might open his eyes to that—"

"Hold it, Faye." Bill was on his feet. "Just don't say it." He swung to the old man. "I'm going to get Karen and let her deny this."

"You sit down," the Chief barked. "Sergeant Duffy will get Karen."

The three of them waited in the faded old room, each with his own thoughts, and let the minutes drag on. Bill looked at Faye smoking nervously, high-strung and on edge. Tearing herself to pieces to live in the faded grandeur of a past, a past that meant nothing. Fighting and clawing to keep up the position of the Stewarts in the glory of their foolish memories. She didn't even realize that her fight was meaningless, belonging to the forgotten world of yesterday.

Bill shifted his eyes to the Chief who was nursing his cold briar pipe, afraid to light it in this mausoleum to the past. Karen was going to walk into this cold, unfriendly house and be accused of hovering around Shantytown furtively, an hour before the fire burst out. A fire they believed was set. She didn't know her uncle had been murdered; she didn't know her danger. Bill's hand balled into a fist and struck his knee as he cursed himself for not having told her the truth last night. She was the girl he loved and he was letting her walk into a rotten thing—maybe a murder charge. He could feel that band of steel slam into his chest again.

The doorbell shrilled through the house and Faye jumped to her feet. From the hall they could hear the low voice of a man and Faye's answering murmur; the Chief looked at Bill questioningly and shifted in his chair.

The man who came into the room with Faye was big and broad and almost as dark as she. He had bold black eyes and a wide smile, a man arrogant in the assurance of his own power. His casual fawn colored slacks and beautiful sports coat, over a canary shirt, were much more

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bolder than Bill's and probably twice as expensive. The man held Faye's hand tightly as they stopped before the Chief.

She introduced them to Cliff Knowles and explained briefly that she had gone to boarding school with his sister, a long time ago.

"Once I saw Faysie, I never forgot her," Cliff's bold eyes laughed down into Faye's and she flushed a little. "I had to go to New York on business from San Francisco, so I detoured by way of Evanstown."

He winked at Bill. "And you know, it was worth every extra mile." He dug out a cigarette from his pocket and shoved it into the side of his mouth, "I hear you folks had quite a fire last night. Tough."

"Since my guest has arrived, Chief," Faye asked, "isn't it possible for me to see Karen later? We don't like each other and I don't see why I should have to be insulted by a girl like that, a—"

Cliff Knowles put his hand on her arm and silenced her, probably for the first time in her life. "I don't know what this is about, but you can't run away from things, baby. You have to stick around and face them."

"I suppose you'll fall for Karen Malloy, too," she blazed. "All the men in town do. A cheap product out of Shantytown."

Bill was on his feet, his eyes cold steel, when he saw Karen standing with Sergeant Duffy in the archway. Her slim shoulders were back and her chin was up. Only her beautiful face, as white as her linen dress, showed that she had heard what Faye said. But she smiled.

Bill crossed the room to her and smiled down into her proud, defiant green eyes. "Come sit with me, Karen," he said gently and took her arm.

"I'd like that, Bill," she said quietly.

"I'm running this, Bill," the Chief's voice was hard. "If you interfere again, you'll go. Understand?" He turned to Faye. "Tell her what you told us."

FAYE glanced at Cliff and Bill wished a stranger didn't have to hear this, but the Chief was allowing him to stay. Faye said smugly that she had seen Karen last night in Shantytown around seven o'clock. "Up at the upper end, just where the fire started."

Karen looked back at her steadily, her eyes unfathomable. Then she turned to the Chief. "Faye's mistaken. I didn't go to Shantytown until after the fire started. I met you there, Chief Simpson, just as I arrived."

"Can you prove it?" the Chief snapped back.

"Can Faye?" Bill cut in angrily, his lean jaw hard.

"You," the Chief exploded, "shut up. Go on, Karen, tell us what you did from the time you arrived in town until I met you at the fire."

She looked down at her hands holding tight to her white linen purse. When she looked up again she was smiling. "I don't think I can prove it. Not unless someone remembers seeing me walking around. I got in on the six-ten from New York. I checked right into the hotel, then I went out again at about six-thirty and just walked around." She had read detective stories, Bill thought, so she must know that as an alibi, this stank; if she didn't know it, one look at Faye's triumphant face would have yelled it at her.

"I'd not been home in six months," Karen went on evenly, "and I suppose I did what most people do when they get back home—I walked around drinking it all in. I thought about all the snobbish little people who'd made my life hell and I was happy, then, Chief Simpson, that I'd put it all behind me." Her voice broke, then went on quietly. "I came back to see my uncle because I'd been sending him thirty dollars a week and I wanted to see if he'd moved out of Shantytown. I had gone down to have it out with him when I met you, Chief Simpson."

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"Could be," the Chief shrugged. "Could not be. Suppose, Karen, after you sent your uncle that seventeen eighty-six coin you found out that it is worth thousands of dollars!" He made a church steeple of his fingers and ignored Karen's quick intake of breath as he built up her motive for arson—and murder. "Suppose you went directly to your uncle when you left the hotel at six-thirty. Suppose he refused to give back the coin and laughed at you, so you fought violently. Then you, hating your hometown, remembering all the slights, the bad times here, furious at your uncle, decided to strike back. You were sneaking around to accomplish it when Faye saw you at seven."

Her chin went up and her eyes were green fire, "I never sneaked in my life," she said coldly.

Bill got to his feet. "Chief," he said harshly, "you go home and read more Freud. You and your frustrations. Come on, darling." He pulled Karen to her feet. "We're getting you a lawyer."

The Chief made no objection, only Cliff Knowles moved toward them a step. "If I can help, Miss Malloy," his bold black eyes smoldered as he drank in her beauty, "call me."

"Don't leave town, Karen," the Chief told her calmly.

"I'm not leaving," she flung back over her shoulder. "Believe me. And thank you, Mr. Knowles."

As they opened the front door they heard Faye's angry brittle voice saying, "But what can you *expect* from a Shantytown girl who's that beautiful? Really!" Bill let the door slam hard.

Outside he took Karen's arm and held it tight. "Are you all right?" he asked gently.

"Why not?" Her laughter twisted his heart again, just as it had when she told him she would not marry him, that he had never been hurt and snubbed by his hometown.

Desperately, he wanted the right to take her into his arms and tell the town he loved her and she was marrying him. But for a long time, ever since that afternoon when he had first met her in the rain, he had sensed that unless you had gone through her hurt, unless you had grown up with it, you couldn't understand her pride. Somehow, she had to work this out for herself, she had to make the town like her and accept her. He didn't pretend to understand it, maybe because he wanted her so much, but he knew that it was there.

"Mind walking to my house to pick up my car? Then we'll get a lawyer for you."

"Of course I don't mind, Bill." They didn't talk after that. It was warm in the hot sun where it dappled through the big oak trees and made strange patterns; the scent of flowers was sweet and heavy on the summer air.

THEY went up the steps and Mrs. Lacey, his housekeeper, let them into the cool, high-ceilinged living room. Strangely, this was the first time she had ever been in his house. When he had asked her before she had shaken her flaming red head and said, too quietly, "Thanks, no. The girl invites a man to *her* house, Bill, or they sit it out." So, they had sat it out in the movies, in the Evans Hotel for dinner, dancing in the nearby roadhouse, or, sometimes, high on the Bluff looking down on the river. And he saw his house now through her eyes. He wished the Chippendale table, the one some jerk had told him was a museum piece, didn't reflect the bowl of red flowers quite so much. He wished the room didn't look so old and complacent with the mellowness of properous years.

She walked to the fireplace and stood looking down at its pristine cleanliness, testimony to Mrs. Lacey's conscience. He watched the sad little smile touch her lips. She turned to him then.

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"Faye's lying, Bill," she told him evenly.

He walked to her, his eyes holding hers. "I know that." He reached for her hungrily, as a man will who's waited too long.

"Don't," she whispered through stiff lips.

"Listen to me, darling." His voice was ragged as he dropped his arms. "I love you. Marry me and we can lick our town together. They'll love you, they'll take you into their hearts when they know you. They are wonderful, generous people when they forget to be afraid. And I've loved you for so very long and so very much, Karen."

Her eyes locked in his and, for that short span of time, they looked at each other's hearts and he thought nothing else mattered. Just that they were a man and a girl who loved each other; then she looked away. Off toward the Chippendale table whose satin smoothness reflected the bowl of red flowers.

"You mustn't love me, Bill," she said, her hands clenched behind her back. "It isn't any good at all—not for us." She drew in her breath. "You see I've decided to marry Vic Lawton. I've decided after what Faye's trying to do to me, that I can never make them accept me in this town. But Vic can."

Bill's fingers bit into her slim shoulders and a muscle twitched along his jaw. "You don't love Vic. You *can't* love him and look at me as you just did. You're trying for revenge for what Faye's trying to do to you. I'm only a dumb newspaper guy, but this town will have you licked until you, yourself, make them like you." His mouth twisted with bitterness, "Oh, sure, I'm cutting off my own neck. This is something you'll have to do alone to ever live with yourself. You must not do this stupid, vengeful thing, Karen. Not you."

"Stop it, Bill, it won't do any good."

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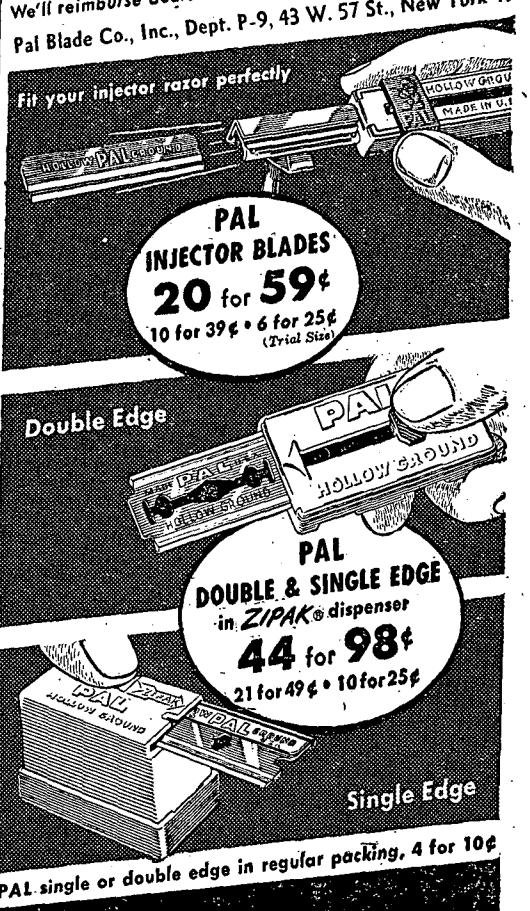

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She closed her eyes and sounded very tired. "Before I marry Vic, I'll have to clear up this arson charge."

He wondered if he should tell her that Jug had been murdered, but he had the Chief's orders not to tell anyone and he would have to get permission first. No one in town knew about Jug's murder but himself and the Police.

"All I needed to be sure about this rotten town is Faye's lie. Vic's a really wonderful person—gay and charming." She was really just talking to herself; it was as though she had forgot Bill. "He's willing that I fill my Copa engagement after I marry him. We'll spend our honeymoon in New York. Then I'll come home. I'll have proved I'm going places in my career and I'll be Vic's wife. All of you will accept me, then."

A stab of pain shot through Bill, like the sharp edge of a knife, and he could feel the hot blood pounding in his temples. Without thought, without volition, he caught her close into his arms. "So, in the end you're just a beautiful cheap . . ." He laughed shortly. "You fill it in. I've loved you, Karen, and you owe me this good-by to my lousy dreams."

He kissed her. Her lips were stiff under the hard, bitter urgency in his, as she fought to get away from him. She had no chance. His arms were a vise as he held her close. After a while she relaxed against him and her lips quivered into life and answered his kiss. It was everything a man has dreamed of and never found; it was the turbulent roaring of the sea to a great crescendo; it was violets in the spring; it was moonlight making a magic world. It was his love.

HIS BREATH caught in his throat as he released her and she stepped back. She stared at him, then she slapped him. Her hand hard against his lean cheek. "Damn you," she whispered. "Oh damn you." And she turned and ran.

He stood there and listened to her high heels running across the porch. He heard them clicking down the steps and across the path and out into the street. And he knew that Karen Malloy was running out of his life.

He walked slowly to the Chippendale table and picked up the bowl of red flowers. It had symbolized the difference in their lives. He smashed the bowl against the fireplace.

The *Sentinel* was still a mess with the contents of the files and desk drawers spilled over the floor. The editorial for tomorrow's paper was still in his typewriter, half finished. Bill dove in and worked harder than he ever had, glad of the physical effort so he wouldn't think. Couldn't think about Vic taking charge of Karen, getting her a lawyer and planning their future.

After a while, he called Chief Simpson and was told that the investigation was going on. Just that, nothing new that he could print in Friday's paper. Maybe he could get a statement from the Mayor on what plans were being made for the homeless victims of Shantytown's fire. The Mayor stammered that they were in the making, but when Bill got tough about it, the Mayor promised to call back in an hour.

IT WAS five-thirty when Vic Lawton called, his happiness coming across the wires. No one had to tell Bill that Karen had promised to marry Vic. There was to be a meeting tonight at the Country Club with the mayor and all the first families, Vic told him gayly. They would decide then what was to be done for Shantytown. Would Bill be there at nine? Bill would. He sat looking at the phone in his hand for a long time, after Vic had hung up, before he slammed it down and went back to his editorial.

The Country Club was out on the edge of town, a big white clapboard build-

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ing sprawling under fine old trees. Tonight it was ablaze with lights and Bill could see little groups clustered together inside as he parked his car. He cut through the bar and out into the lounge. Suddenly, he could feel the tension; it was a tangible thing screaming at him.

Vic saw him and came to him, his face white. "Will you try and find Karen? She's gone outside." Vic sounded upset. "My mother has had a—a heart attack." He waved toward the powder room. "My family and my friends, all the people I've grown up with, all of them cut Karen dead tonight."

Bill could feel the back of his neck burn as the hot anger spilled through him. His hands balled into fists. "Why the dirty stinkers." His voice had risen so everyone in the lounge heard him. The people whom he had known, whom he had loved in spite of some of their foolish, wierd conventions, turned and stared at him in stunned hurt. He hated them. Hated their smug complacency and their cruelty to a defenseless girl.

Faye put her hand on his arm, "Don't, Bill," she said quietly. "You'll only make it worse for Karen. You see, I'm afraid I told that I saw her down in Shantytown an hour before the fire, and then she came in to our meeting tonight with Vic. To *our* meeting." She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, you can just imagine."

"Yes." Bill looked at Faye, dressed smartly in black pique and a small severe black straw hat. "I can imagine. You're just like the rest of them, only maybe you play even dirtier."

He pushed by her and heard the amazement in the voices around him. The damn fools didn't know what they were doing. Cliff Knowles touched his arm. "Can I help any? This town's rough, boy."

"They haven't had a witch served up to them in a hundred years until tonight," Bill answered curtly and didn't break his stride. "I can manage, thanks." He wondered why on earth Karen had been foolish enough to try and buck the whole town tonight? Why she hadn't waited until the fire thing was cleared up and they were used to the idea of her marriage to Vic?

Outside on the wide veranda the lights from the Club made curious little patches of light and he found her leaning against a pillar, staring out into the moonlight. He swallowed hard and touched her arm. "Karen."

She whirled, her head still high and that beautiful proud smile working. Only her eyes were stark misery. "Oh, Bill." Her voice trembled with relief.

"Let's get out of here." He drew her hand through his arm. "There's nothing in this lousy town for either one of us."

He drove rapidly to the high place on the Bluff where they had parked too many times, high above the river. After he lit their cigarettes, he turned in the seat so he could look at her. "I'm sorry about this morning, Karen. I was crazy with jealousy I guess. I never was before."

She put her hand on his arm. "It's all right, I understand. You were right. Not even Vic and his position could make them take that Malloy girl." After a long time she said, "I'm going back to New York after the funeral and the investigation and I'll not come back. I can't marry Vic; he's too nice a person. I can't marry you, Bill, because I—" She let it go.

"Why did you go to that meeting tonight? It was too soon. They all expect Faye to marry Vic and they rushed to protect her."

"Bill, I am the one who grew up in Shantytown. I'm the one who understands about conditions there and what the people need. They're my people, I guess, and I wanted to help them have a chance to live decently. I wanted to tell them at the Club tonight what's needed." She sighed. "I really flopped at it."

"I'm getting out, too, Karen." Bill took

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her hand and held it tightly, "I'm fed up. Let them live in their past, in their tight little world." He put his arm around her and felt her stiffen, "Look, darling, I'm going to New York. Will you see me there and try to love me, after a while?"

HER EYES searched his face and she slowly shook her head. "No, Bill, I won't see you. This is your town, darling, and you love it. You see these people as real human beings under their crust of snobbishness. You see them as people desperately clinging to the past because they're afraid of the world today. Escape, I suppose. And you love owning a weekly paper." She smiled. "Remember how you used to tell me you're the one newspaper man in a thousand who ever makes that dream come true?" She lifted her hand and touched his cheek gently. "I'm sorry, darling, that I hit you. So very sorry."

"Stop this chatter. I love you. There's nothing for me anywhere without you. Karen, I—" He tried to take her into his arms.

She stiffened and pushed him away. "Don't, please. I can't take any more tonight. I—just let me go, Bill." He could see the two tears spill out of her eyes and run unheeded down her face. "I'm just bad news in our hometown. Take me back to the hotel, now, please."

He lit another cigarette and took a deep drag as he stared out at the silvered river below. He sensed again that she had to work this thing out for herself, someway. She had to make the town like her and accept her because it meant so terribly much to her. After the arson was cleared up and the murder of her uncle, maybe then she could figure out something. He backed the car and turned into the road for town. There was nothing he could say to her because, sometimes, love just isn't quite enough.

Before they reached the hotel she turned to him. "I'm afraid that because I went there tonight with Vic and he told everyone we were engaged, that they'll do nothing for Shantytown right away." He could feel her eyes fastened on his face and he nodded in argreement. "Even your editorials won't help because Mrs. Lawton will see to it that they don't. But, Bill, the whole town would come to hear me sing, hoping I'd flop." She laughed shakily. "You know like going to the zoo to see a strange animal. Couldn't you stage a huge Shantytown benefit tomorrow night at the Auditorium at a hundred dollars a ticket? I'll put on a program. I'll get good talent up from New York on the morning plane. Do this for me, Bill." She touched his arm and the touch of her tingled through him. "After all, I grew up down there and they're in desperate straits. And *you* must be the one who's doing it." Her voice dropped to a husky whisper, "They must never, never know I thought of it. I'll be just one of the performers."

For the first time, he began to have a glimmer of hope. Just maybe it might work. With lots of luck. "I'll get right at it and I'll phone you tonight." He pulled up in front of the hotel and studied her. "Did you get that lawyer?"

"Not yet." She shook her red curls. "Vic wanted to bring over McCurdy, but I thought by tomorrow Chief Simpson would find who really set that fire." She looked scared suddenly. "I mean he can't hate me, too."

Bill couldn't trust himself to speak, so he climbed out of the car and walked around to open her door. He stood there looking down at the marquee lights shining on her lovely hair. "No one really hates you, darling. Some of them can't quite take it that you're nicer and stronger than they."

She smiled up at him as she swung out of the car. "Tell me when I need a lawyer, Bill."

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"I'll tell you," he promised. He walked with her to the elevator and stood there until it took her away.

VIC WAS still at the Country Club when Bill phoned. He was enthusiastic about Bill's idea of an immediate benefit at a hundred dollars a ticket when he learned that Karen would sing. His mother had recovered from her heart attack, but nothing had been agreed upon about Shantytown, so this came as a blessing. They would all jam the place, Vic admitted sadly, to hear how bad Karen really was. Vic's voice sounded dead, as though his moment of dreaming was over and he had slipped back into his groove. For the first time, Bill felt sorry for the guy. He had tried to be regular.

He went to the *Sentinel* and routed out his pressman, then phoned the local printer to start on the tickets for the benefit. Friday's paper had to be put to bed and he needed his own press. Chief Simpson told him gruffly, when he located him at headquarters, that they had found nothing new. No clue, nothing leading away from Karen as their arsonist and probable murderer. Bill exploded.

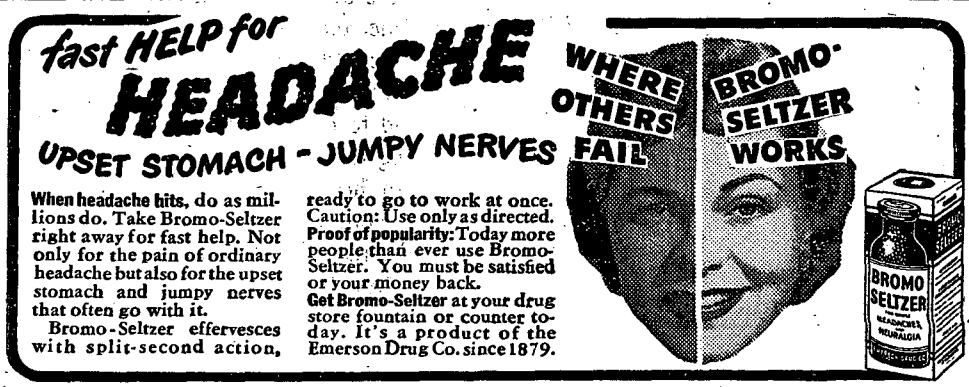
"Oh, shut up," the Chief said wearily and slammed up the phone.

This was the only time in Bill's life that he'd known fear, a terrible fear for Karen that choked him. He took a cigarette and tried three times before he could get it lit and let the fear ride him. Then his brain started working again and he knew she was innocent and the Chief would know it, too,

Karen's voice was cool when Bill finally called her, yet he could detect the uncertainty and the loneliness underneath. She was silent for a full minute after he told her to go ahead and round up the other talent in New York. "Thanks, Bill. It'll be a wonderful show tomorrow night, you'll see." She hesitated. "You'll be proud of me, Bill." Before he could answer, the phone softly clicked off.

It was late the next afternoon when Cliff Knowles strolled into the *Sentinel*. Everything was finished, the paper was on the streets, the tickets were at the Auditorium selling so fast there would be only standing room left in another half hour. Bill was smoking a cigarette, his last one before he went home to dress. The big dark man grinned at Bill, swaggering a little as he shoved back his hat.

"Say, I just bought three tickets for your benefit tonight, for Faye, her mother and me. Three hundred bucks they cost me." He shoved his hat back farther on his head. "You're not stingy with other people's dough." They laughed together politely and Bill waited for him to get to the point. "I got to thinking about the spot the Malloy kid's in on this arson rap, and that she would be needing a lawyer. Lawyers cost money." He laughed short-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ly. "Girls don't make too much singing in second rate night-clubs in New York, so I'm willing to buy that old gold coin of hers, that seventeen eighty-six deal. Just big hearted."

Bill's gray eyes narrowed slightly as he smiled. "Yes? I thought you were overboard for Faye."

"Behave." Cliff laughed with undisguised amusement. "She's overboard for Vic and maybe not quite my type. I like them more human and a lot more beautiful. Look, let's quit kidding. Karen's in a jam up to her beautiful neck and you know it." His voice hardened. "She's walking straight into a murder rap. That old character, Jug, was shot."

BILL could feel himself freeze, but he only kept grinning as he slowly lowered his feet from his desk and put out his cigarette. He remembered that Karen had said that some man in New York, some dealer, had telephoned her offering to buy the seventeen eighty-six coin. If she recognized the voice it would help an awful lot. He motioned nonchalantly toward his telephone. "Call Miss Malloy at the hotel, and make your offer." He watched Cliff Knowles jerk it up, then leer wolfishly.

He made his speech to Karen and Bill got up, canting a hip on his desk, an easy position from which to go into action. "Ok, honey," Cliff said, "you think it over. But I'm not hanging around this town for long." Bill could hear the excitement in Karen's voice coming over the wires and then Cliff said, "OK, talk to Bill. It's a good deal though, kid."

"Bill, that's the same." She forgot to lower her voice and it was audible to Cliff. His hand streaked underneath his coat as Bill dropped the phone and hit him with a left uppercut and followed it with a beautiful right cross. Slowly Cliff went over backward and down, the gun half out of his shoulder holster.

Bill jerked it the rest of the way out and stood over Cliff. Cliff felt his jaw and started to climb to his feet, glaring at Bill with dumb disbelief in his eyes. "What's the idea?" he blustered.

"You crum bum," Bill exploded. "No one in this town knew that Jug Malloy was murdered, but the Chief of Police, his detectives and I. Unless you were the one who shot him in the back you *couldn't* have known. Not possibly."

"You're nuts, my friend." Cliff laughed and his hand darted toward his back hip pocket. Bill shot him through the right shoulder.

"I'd make a lousy cop," Bill said sadly as he took the second gun, a .45 out of Cliff's back pocket. "I thought you only carried one."

They burst into the *Sentinel* office like a herd of elephants. Chief Simpson was in the lead, followed by Tony and three other dicks, guns all waving.

"Karen called me and sent me here. This," he gestured with his gun toward Cliff Knowles, "had the same voice over the phone as the man who'd called her in New York wanting to buy that seventeen eighty-six gold piece. I suppose he murdered Jug?" Bill nodded and explained briefly. "But why for only a few thousand?"

"Probably because this Doubloon was not minted, nor milled, so it was coined by the pressure molding process. That means that two halves of the mold were engraved in steel, in intaglio. Then, these halves were mounted in lead. Gold was pressed between them in a coin press. Trim the edges for the weight and presto, you can flood the market today with rare, rare seventeen eighty-six Doubloons. Ask Caleb Stone the exact process. It wasn't just for this one coin, but for what they could do with it, the dozens they could make from it. And take a look at Tough Boy's face." Knowles was pasty white, a rim of sweat around his mouth.

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"Knowles," the Chief pounced, "you set that fire after you shot Jug. You knew where to find him because Karen gave you that lead. You watched Bill find the yellow tobacco sack, go to the hotel and then come up here to the *Sentinel*. You hit him, met Faye as you were doing it, and made a deal with her to tell her story involving Karen at the fire. She would do that because she's wild with jealousy and hatred for Karen. Take the sucker, boys." At the door the Chief turned to Bill and his eyebrows twitched. "In case you're wondering, smarty pants, I never did think Karen had anything to do with this. She's just too swell a girl. But I knew if you thought I did, you might come up with something for me."

"I ought to chop off your fat ears." Bill laughed.

THE Auditorium was jammed, people standing leaked out into the aisles and they had to open the fire doors. Bill stood in the wings as Karen went out before her town to sing her first songs. She wore a strapless bodice and long gathered skirt of white organdy into which were woven leaves outlined in velvet, the color of her hair. And then, she began to sing.

For her last song before the intermission she gave them *Dear Hearts and Gentle People* and she socked it into her hometown.

He caught her as the curtains swung together and held her tight against his heart. "That told them, darling." The applause was fair, good for a cold house. "You're wonderful," he said huskily.

"Oh, do you think so, Bill," she asked softly, her eyes shining up into his.

Before he could answer Chief Simpson came backstage with a white, stoney-faced Faye Stewart. "Miss Stewart lied about seeing you, Karen, down at Shantytown at seven o'clock," he rasped. "Just plain lied. She agreed with Knowles, when she walked in and found him conking Bill on the back of the head, to tell it. She honestly didn't know he'd set that fire. We have his word that she only thought he wanted the gold Doubloon."

Faye looked at Karen, "I was rotten," she said steadily. "I've always hated you because I've been afraid of you. I knew you could take Vic from me and, you see, I happen to love him. Do you want me to go out and tell the town what I did to you?"

Karen reached out a tentative hand, almost as though she were afraid she'd have it slapped away, and her smile was beautiful. "Let's try and forget it, Faye. When you love a man enough you'll do darn near anything for him." She looked up at Bill. "Even to leaving so you won't spoil his life."

Bill turned from them and quickly stepped out between the curtains. "I've got news for you people," his voice carried through the auditorium. Then he told them about a girl who had never stopped loving her hometown, even when the town turned its back on her and cut her dead. A girl from Shantytown who had grown big enough to stay forever loyal to her own. This was *her* benefit tonight, her help to Shantytown. "Karen Malloy," he said, "who just sang *Dear Hearts and Gentle People* for *her* hometown." He stepped toward the curtains and pulled them back, "Karen," he called. She stepped through with her chin up and her lovely smile. "These," he said simply, "are your people."

And they were. They cheered, hesitantly at first, then it roared. "Will you stay, now, with me?" he asked quietly. "After you've sung at the Copa?"

"I haven't signed the contract. I only want it, Bill, here in Evanstown if I can have it with you." Her eyes were like the stars you can reach up and almost touch some nights in the desert.

He took her in his arms then and kissed her while the cheers rose around them.

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Angel in Waiting

By DIANE AUSTIN

The angel in Joyce brought out the devil in Quinn.

IF ANYONE had ever told Quinn McNeil that angels could have toothaches, he'd have laughed right in their blasphemous faces. But that was before the rosy-letter day he walked into the cream-and-maroon reception room of Doctor Arthur Shipman.

And there she was. A halo of a hat framing red-gold hair, heavenly blue eyes, angelic lips and—a swollen jaw.

A bell rang somewhere. Sweet and true and clear. And if he had had any doubts on the subject up to this moment, the bell cinched it. That's for me, Quinn thought. And brother, it couldn't happen to a nicer guy.

"Have you an appointment?" a pleasant voice said.

He blinked, then focused on an antiseptic-looking, starched nurse.

"Who—me?" he uttered finally.

"Didn't you just come in?" she asked. "I thought I heard the bell."

The bell! He said, "You mean that was the door bell," and his voice was as flat as leftover beer.

The nurse nodded and he glanced swiftly over to the angel. At any rate, she was real. She hadn't flown the coop.

"My name's McNeil," he announced. "I made the appointment last week." He added, as if it explained everything, "I went to college with Doctor Shipman. He always said if any of the boys ever needed—"

"Oh yes," the nurse broke in. "If you'll have a chair until he's ready to see you—"

"You bet," declared Quinn.

With that, he sat down on the maroon leather divan directly opposite the angel, and stared happily at her crossed legs. When he had learned them by heart, he shifted into high and stared at her face.

The blue eyes widened. Very coolly, she picked up a bulky magazine from the table adjoining her chair and spread it out. Quinn found himself confronted with the back and front covers of the *Dog Lovers Annual.*

What could a guy do? He went back to her legs.

Some three uncrossings and crossings later, the nurse rustled out again, escorting a well-upholstered matron whose face looked as tortured as though she had just been through the wars. Revolutionary and Civil. The patient was maneuvered through the door and the nurse turned back.

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"You mean—you mean—this is your dog?" he stammered.

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"Miss Greer," she beckoned.

Down came the magazine, and up came the angel. She floated right past Quinn in a celestial cloud of perfume, and followed the nurse inside.

Quinn reeled to his feet. He loved that girl. He worshipped her. After they were married, he'd settle down with her in a vine-covered cottage, California style, and become a regular heaven-loving guy. They'd have a kid. The way he felt now, maybe even two.

All he had to do was meet her.

He sat down in the seat she had just relinquished and waited for a brainstorm. But the weather in his gray cells remained fair. And warmer.

Oh well, he'd think of something. He reached over and picked up *Dog Lovers Annual* and, idly, began to leaf through the pages. A full-color advertisement caught his eye.

The girl in it was wearing an agreeably pink and lacy slip and she had legs almost as good as his angel's. She was holding on to a leash on the other end of which strained a wire-haired terrier.

Say! if that little terrier wasn't the spit and image of his own terrier, Robin Hood. It was a pretty tricky ad when you got right down to it. Maybe he'd buy some of that Ideal Dog Food.

IT WAS then that the brainstorm burst. Just a few drizzles of an idea at first, true. But before long, as the plan acquired shape and form, it was raining cats and dogs.

Especially dogs.

Supposing a guy was trying to meet a certain girl, supposed Quinn. So supposing, he inserted an ad in the Lost and Found column, over the girl's name and address, saying she had lost her wire-haired terrier. Next he brings his own dog to the girl's house and tells her, "Look what I found." She shakes her head and says, "No, there must be some mistake about the ad because I didn't lose any dog."

Okay then. So the guy smiles and says, "Well, I may as well keep the terrier." And while he and the girl are puzzling over the seeming mystery of the ad, what could be more inevitable than that she should realize what a fine, sterling character the guy is—and fall in love with him!

Quinn was exultant. What a scheme. The whole thing was nothing less than a master stroke. Why, Machiavelli was a blundering fool compared to him. Just as soon as he found out her full name and address he'd—

The inner door opened. The angel, alias Miss Greer, came out. He watched, spellbound, as she walked over to the mirror, pulled out a lipstick and retouched her mouth.

She never even gave him a glance. Just closed her bag again and scooted out of the office. A fine thing, Quinn thought. Never even recognized the father of her three children.

"Mr. McNeil." The nurse was framed in the doorway. "Doctor Shipman will see you now."

It was true that Quinn and Arthur Shipman had gone to college together, even belonged to the same fraternity, but they had been three years apart in classes. Quinn remembered him as a tall, chunkily built fellow, with a perpetually ruddy face.

His memory could still be depended on, Quinn saw, as he entered the office.

"Well, well, well," he greeted him breezily. "Artie Shipman."

They shook hands, and the dentist gave him a rather feeble smile.

"It's been a long time, McNeil," he said. "Lots of water gone under the bridges, eh?"

And he smiled again to accompany his little joke. Quinn winced exaggeratingly and climbed into the chair.

Hardly had he settled back though,

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than another brainstorm burst upon him. In a matter of seconds he had doped out an angle on how to find out his angel's name and address.

"Say, Artie—" he began.

"Open," Dr. Shipman said.

After that there was a running commentary on the dentist's part about what had happened to so-and-so, and in reply, now and then, a few strangled words from Quinn. It was some twenty minutes later that Shipman was washing up and the nurse was putting away his instruments and Quinn was feeling as though a bulldozer had just taken a short cut through his mouth.

BUT THEN he cheered up. Now was the time to make like a private eye. It wouldn't do to come right out and ask Artie and risk being heckled about it; he'd just have to worm out the information in clever fashion.

"By the way, Artie," he said casually. "That patient of yours who was just in here. I could swear she's a girl who went to college with my sister."

"Oh?" The dentist glanced at him rather oddly then, Quinn thought. But then he dismissed it as imagination and pursued his tactics.

"Name's Greer, I believe. Lived at the Melrose Arms last I heard."

Artie, of course, would say, "No I don't think it's the same girl, since this one doesn't live at the Melrose Arms, she lives at so-and-so number so-and-so Street."

Arthur Shipman said rather flatly, "Probably not the same girl. It never is."

Period. That was all. Quinn, abject and crestfallen, made an apointment for the same time the following week, bid his old college mate good-by and went out, his status now reduced to that of a private eyesore.

"Pssssst!"

Startled, he glanced around. The nurse was beckoning to him.

"It's unethical," she whispered.

"What is?"

"My taking out Miss Joyce Greer's card from the files and showing it to you, so you can get her address."

"You didn't—" He broke off. He found himself staring, hard, at the rectangular white card she was flourishing in front of his eyes. "Oh, I see!" he exclaimed. "Say, thanks! Thanks a lot, Miss—"

"Think something of it," said the surprising nurse, smiling. "And the name's Laura Harlow."

For the first time Quinn noticed that she was definitely on the attractive side; that she had dark, fluffy hair, nice skin, and a figure that did things for her uniform; and that she wasn't so very, very antiseptic after all.

The classified advertisement that Quinn had inserted, according to plan, appeared

GUCKENHEIMER
the BIG name in whiskey
THE AMERICAN DISTILLING COMPANY, INC.
NEW YORK • PEKIN, ILL. • SAN FRANCISCO
86 PROOF — 60% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS
MINIATURE SALT AND PEPPER SHAKERS
Send 15 cents in coin or stamps to defray cost of packing and mailing pair of salt and pepper shakers made from miniatures 4½ inches tall.
Address Dept. S. P.
THE AMERICAN DISTILLING CO., INC.
PEKIN, ILLINOIS

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the following evening. Satisfied that it had been set up just as he had ordered, he folded the newspaper, tucked it under his arm and set sail with Robin Hood. He'd name one of their four kids after the editor of that *Dog Lovers Annual*, see if he didn't.

Joyce Greer lived in a wholesome looking apartment house. She had the first apartment to the left as you stepped out of the elevator on the third floor. Quinn could tell because of the congestion around her door. Two women, seven men and nine assorted canines. He counted them.

There was a clamorous discussion going on. It consisted of the men and women shouting something about their respective hounds, of Joyce repeatedly and vehemently protesting "No!" and of various pitches of yowls, yelps and barks. Quinn grinned. He waited.

EVENTUALLY they straggled off, trailing a few disgruntled murmurs behind them. The apartment door slammed shut in a no-buts-about-it tone of finality. Which, of course, was Quinn's cue to stroll over and push a finger on the bell. Hard.

The door opened instantly. In a gold-colored dress with a neckline down to here, his angel was looking even more celestial than he had remembered. Besides, her jaw was no longer swollen.

She began, "If you're another—" and then stopped, eyeing him quizzically.

"Miss Greer. Miss Joyce Greer?" he asked with a poker face that would have done justice to a royal flush.

She continuel to peer at him, and it suddenly occurred to him that she might be trying to place him.

Hastily, he held up Robin Hood. "Well, here's your dog," he chirped. "Safe and sound. My name's Quinn McNeil."

"I— How do you do."

"Say hello to your mistress, poochie. Aren't you glad to see her?" he prompted.

Robin Hood made a dismal face and yelped.

"I saw your ad in tonight's paper," he went on, undaunted. "And I said to myself, 'I wonder if that little brown-and-white wirehair that followed me home from the studio could be the one.' And, well—here he is." He held out Robin Hood.

Quinn worked in the publicity department of the studio. But it wouldn't hurt to let Joyce Greer conjure up her own embellished visions of what he did there.

She repeated, "The ad in tonight's paper—"

"Yup. I have it right here." He unfolded the newspaper. "It says, 'Lost. Brown and white wire-haired terrier. Vicinity Pico and Motor. Return to Joyce Greer, 945 Hilgard Avenue. Reward.'"

The reward bit was a nice touch, he thought. Made the ad sound that much more authentic. She'd protest to him that it wasn't her dog, naturally, as she had done with the others. But he'd have met her! One down and heaven to go. He'd take the good old pigskin from there, all right.

"Oh," she exclaimed abruptly. "Of course."

"Of course?" he said woodenly.

She took Robin Hood out of his suddenly lifeless hands. "Come to Mama, Geraldine," was what she distinctly said.

Geraldine! Quinn gulped. He opened his mouth to speak, but all he could do was work it fish-like.

"I thought I'd lost her forever," she was murmuring, nuzzling her nose into Robin Hood's wiry coat. "Such a naughty dog to run away from its mama. How can I ever thank you, Mr. McNeil?"

"Just call me Quinn," he said dazedly, recovering a croaking semblance of a voice. And then, "You mean—you mean —this is your dog?"

She regarded him somewhat indignantly. "Certainly. I advertised, didn't I?"

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"Well, yeah—" he conceded doubtfully. "Only—"

"Only what?" Her tone was as heartwarming and as cordial as an iceberg.

He scratched the back of his head. This was decidedly not what was supposed to happen to him, according to the scheme. He had an uncomfortably funny feeling that he had been dumped out on his own. What had happened to that good old pigskin he was going to carry through the line? What had happened to the dream of heaven awaiting him?

What, in short, did Machiavelli McNeil do now?

And then he thought of something. Not much, but at least it was something.

"The reward," he blurted, clutching the word as if it had been a log and he a drowning man. "What about the reward?"

JOYCE continued to stroke Robin Hood who was growling and fidgeting in her arms. "Poor little Geraldine," she crooned. "Poor little puppy. Mama's darling baby."

In behalf of the forlorn Robin Hood, Quinn winced.

"The reward," he said again.

She looked up at him and smiled. And when you add a smile to an angel, you've got a combination to wilt the most hardy of men. Quinn's knees dissolved.

"Will you accept a kiss?" she asked demurely.

Would he accept a kiss? *Would he accept a kiss!* Would a beggar accept alms?

He grinned in return. "Sure," he answered, vainly attempting to keep his enthusiasm from showing. "Any time."

She held out Robin Hood. "Kiss the nice young man, Geraldine," she directed.

Obligingly, the terrier licked Quinn's face.

She pulled the dog to her again and stepped backward into her apartment.

"Thanks again," she said sweetly, flashing another brief smile, and the door slowly began to close.

He stirred to life. "Hey!"

She looked at him inquiringly. "Yes?"

"You can't do this to me— I mean—" Again he grasped around for a log. "Are you sure this is your dog?"

"Positive, Mr. McNeil." She dimpled. "Quinn—"

With difficulty, he ignored the bribe. "But come to think of it," he persisted, "he isn't a girl dog."

"Of course she is." Her tone rapidly cooled off. "Now will you please go away? I've got a date."

He bristled. "No. I'm certain he's a boy."

"It's a girl!"

"It's a boy!"

A familiarly hearty voice put in, "Congratulations. How much did it weigh?"

Quinn whirled. He was confronted with an outstretched hand which belonged to a chunkily built fellow with a ruddy face. Arthur Shipman!

The hand was withdrawn as the other man took stock of Quinn. "Oh—" he said lamely. "Hello, Joyce. Quinn. I didn't know you two knew each other."

Joyce spoke up, almost defiantly. "Hello, Arthur. Quinn's just returned my dog to me. Say hello to Arthur, Geraldine."

Robin Hood gave him a baleful glance and sniffed disdainfully.

"I didn't know you had a dog," Arthur said, regarding Quinn with what seemed to him out-and-out suspicion.

He retorted eagerly, "She doesn't."

"You didn't know I had a dog," Joyce chimed in, "'cause she's been lost."

"He's been lost!" Quinn shouted.

She smiled. "Come on in, Arthur. I'm just about ready."

"Look, Artie," Quinn implored in desperation. "The wire-hair here— Is it a boy or a girl?"

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"Obviously a girl," Arthur promptly replied.

Quinn nearly howled with pain. "A girl! How can you stand there and tell me that?"

"Her name's Geraldine, isn't it?" Artie pointed out. "That ought to settle it."

Joyce added, "Now go away. Arthur and I will be late for the show." Only, when she said that, she smiled.

In her arms, Robin Hood yipped pleadingly.

"Well, nice to have run into you this way," Artie murmured and followed Joyce inside.

The door closed.

Said Quinn to the closed door, "I may be licked, but I'm not out."

HE DISREGARDED the elevator and clumped down the three flights of stairs. Some girls will stoop to anything, he muttered to himself. She was no better than a dognapper, that's what. It was a damn good thing he had seen this other, seamy side of her character before it was too late. Not that any judge in his right mind wouldn't have awarded him custody of the five kids.

And how do you like that guy Shipman? A fine old college buddy he was, trying to beat Quinn's time that way. No wonder he had clammed up when he had been trying to pump him for Joyce's name and address. Quinn wondered morosely just how much of a beachhead the dentist had established.

But then again what difference did it make? He had no use for a girl who would pull a stunt as underhanded as that.

And then, driving home, he made the mistake of remembering the way Joyce had smiled at him before closing the door.

The next evening he dialed her number.

"Quinn," she said. "I'm so glad it's you. I was just sitting here wishing you'd call."

"You were?" he asked incredulously, and felt himself being transported to a technicolored cloud.

"Uh huh. I wonder—if you're not doing anything—could you come over tomorrow night? Say, around seven?"

"You bet! I'll be there with bells on!"

"You're an angel."

"Likewise," Quinn murmured.

"Geraldine will be so thrilled to see you again," she said. " 'Bye."

Boyohboy! He'd buy Joyce the biggest box of candy she ever saw. He'd bring Robin Hood the grandfather of all juicy bones, and—on a note of happy inspiration—a can of Ideal dog food!

He showed up at her apartment the following evening, gifts in hand. Robin Hood leaped at him madly, nearly succeeding in throwing him down.

But it was Joyce who finished the job of bowling him over. She was wearing a strapless evening gown. All white and shimmering. And her hair was curled out around her vibrant face. What the well-dressed angel will wear . . .

"Gosh," Quinn said, and even his voice sounded overwhelmed. "Who expected this?"

"We're going dancing," she announced. "The Coconut Grove, I think."

Quinn would have preferred somewhere more quiet and secluded where he could put his arms around her and whisper heavenly things in her ear and kiss— He gave a mental sigh. Well, if she had her heart set on dancing.

"Wonderful!" he exclaimed brightly. "There's nothing I'd like better than—"

The door bell rang.

"Gosh. There's Arthur now," Joyce said hurriedly, grabbing a coat and purse from the chair. "You're awfully sweet to offer to sit with Geraldine tonight while I'm out."

She edged toward the door, trailing the hint of a smile in her wake.

"Hey! Wait—" he protested belatedly.

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But she had already breezed out. And not for anything would he run out into the hall after them and thereby give Artie the satisfaction of knowing how he had been trapped.

A DOG sitter! He jammed his hands in his pockets. He kicked at the sofa leg in disgust. Robin Hood was barking ecstatically and running around him in joyous circles.

"I brought you a bone," Quinn told him morosely. "And some crummy dog food."

Even more morosely, he unwrapped the packages, found an opener in the kitchen for the can, and turned the terrier loose.

Next he opened the candy, helped himself to a raspberry cream, and parked himself on the sofa with the box. After that, he thoughtfully selected a crunchy nut concoction. Then a chocolate fudge. Then another cream.

It was a little before ten when he finished the box. But between munches, Quinn had been far from idle. He had been doing some very serious and some very practical reflection.

Now take Artie, he had instructed himself at the onset of the reflection. He undoubtedly imagined himself to be in love with Joyce. Witness the two dates they had together, if not more, and also the fact that Artie had hedged about giving him her address. But also witness the fact that Artie's nurse—Laura Harlow, that was it—had been only too eager to supply it. Was it a lot of rubbish to suppose that *she* was in love with Artie and wanted Quinn to knock him out of the running with Joyce?

It was not a lot of rubbish, Quinn told himself complacently. On the contrary, it made a great deal of sense. And what was more, Laura's tactics gave him a terrific idea; an idea which happened to occur to him coincidental with the bare state of the candy box.

Quinn unfolded himself from the couch and went in hunt of a telephone book. Robin Hood padded along after him. In a few moments he had found the listing he wanted, and dialed the number.

"Hello," the voice at the other end of the wire said.

"Laura? This is Quinn. Quinn McNeil. You know—two cavities and a polishing job."

Her laughter echoed across the wires. "Of course. How are you?"

Greatly encouraged, he went on. "How about going dancing tonight?" he asked. "There's a great show at the Coconut Grove."

"Tonight?" There was a little pause. And then she murmured, "Isn't it rather late to be calling?"

"You call ten o'clock late?" he demanded. "Why, I—" He swallowed. "I've just finished eating, myself. How about it, Laura?"

Another little pause. "All right," she said finally. "Give me half an hour to dress."

It was exactly half an hour by the time he pulled up in front of Laura's house, with Robin Hood prancing on the front seat beside him. Laura was wearing something black and very sheer and looking pretty and very animated.

What a decoy! Quinn thought exultantly.

She slipped into the car and they drove off. "What a sweet dog," she declared, stroking Robin Hood's wiry coat. "What kind is he?"

"A bloodhound," Quinn said, with the trace of a grin on his face.

She glanced up at him warily. "Quinn—"

But he merely shook his head, and after that, except for the exchange of a few polite comments, they rode along in silence.

When they reached the hotel, a blandly unperturbed headwaiter smoothly re-

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moved the terrier and deposited him with the hat-check girl. Laura raised her eyebrows.

"He's not much of a bloodhound, anyway," Quinn told her unabashedly. "I forgot to bring something for him to sniff."

NO SOONER had they been settled at their table than he jumped up again. "Come on, Laura. Let's dance."

She felt nice in his arms. But pretty—well, earthy. Nothing like an angel would feel. And besides, on the second time around the crowded floor, Quinn had spotted his quarry. Joyce, an angelic vision of loveliness, was dancing with that polecat, Shipman.

When the music signed off, Quinn kept hold of Laura's hand. Towing her along after him without a word of explanation, he headed for the table for two he had already spotted, off in a dim corner.

Joyce and Artie glanced up in surprise, and it seemed to Quinn that rosy color slowly suffused his angel's face.

"Well, how about that," he exclaimed brightly. "Imagine running into you two here. And Laura and I were just saying we wondered what dentists did to amuse themselves in their spare time. Weren't we, Laura?"

The girl's eyes held reproach for him. But they held something else. Something soft and shiny and infinitely tender; and it was there, Quinn suddenly knew, because she was looking at Artie Shipman. For the first time since he had conceived of the scheme, Quinn felt the faint flutter of misgivings.

"Yes, we were wondering," Laura was saying spirited. "We thought maybe you went to—to watch building excavations or something."

Artie rose slowly to his feet. "Won't you join us?" he asked.

But Quinn was already telling the waiter to bring over two more chairs. The four of them were soon huddled around the hardly more than handkerchief-sized table.

"As a matter of fact," Artie began, clearing his throat. "We dentists don't find it hard at all to dispose of our spare time. It's as easy as—pulling teeth!"

He shook with laughter. Laura joined him heartily. Joyce's mouth spread a little in a dutiful smile. Quinn grimaced.

"Serves me right for asking," he murmured. "Say, Joyce, that music sounds good. How about a dance?"

He leaped up, and she followed him amiably enough. He felt like purring with contentment. His angel was in his arms, and he was holding heaven at last.

Her voice came to him through a haze. "I suppose I asked for this."

He grinned. "You sure did, Angel. That was a plenty dirty trick you pulled."

"I thought you and Geraldine would be good company for each other," she murmured. "You have so much in common."

He nearly tripped over his own feet. "Huh?"

"I mean," she went on softly, "Geraldine likes you so much, and you like you so much."

He couldn't think of anything to say to that. There didn't seem to be much of a choice in the way of possibilities. But the remark was penetrating his consciousness like a shaft of cold steel.

THEY RETURNED to their table. Artie's face was ruddier than ever, and his lips were set in a tight, thin line. Laura's eyes were suspiciously red-rimmed; there were two glaring spots of red high on her cheeks.

"Hey—" Quinn asked bluntly. "What gives?"

"Please excuse me," Laura said in a choking voice, and rose from her seat, "I—I've got to powder my nose."

She fled, and as Quinn stared worriedly

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after her, Joyce added, "Me, too," and disappeared in the same direction.

Quinn turned back to the table. "Why is it—" he began, then stopped. Artie was looking positively belligerent!

"What the hell do you mean following us here with Laura?" he asked bluntly.

"Watch your language, feller," Quinn said. "I've got my mother's picture in my wallet."

"Very funny," Artie remarked, more grim than ever. "But I'd give plenty to know just what it is you're trying to pull."

Quinn felt his light-heartedness ebbing away. "You know something, Artie," he said quietly. "So would I."

After that, they sat there in bleak silence. Joyce came back at last, her face calm and unsmiling.

Artie jumped up. "How's Laura?" he demanded.

Quinn straightened in his seat.

"She'll be out soon," Joyce told him. "And, Arthur, I hope you don't mind if I ask Quinn to take me home now. He and I—we have a little business to finish."

To finish. Quinn slumped again. But then once more his spirits soared. At least she had wanted him to take her home.

They collected Robin Hood from the hat-check girl, and Joyce held the terrier in her lap during the drive back. Quinn was waiting for her to begin any conversation, but as the streets rolled past and she continued to gaze out the side window, he, too, refrained from talk.

When they reached her apartment, however, she hesitated before the locked door, key in hand. Quinn grew reckless.

"Guess we showed that guy Shipman," he said. "Him and his stale jokes."

Joyce stiffened. She turned, her back rigid against the door.

"I think you'd better take your dog and get out of here," she murmured.

The words penetrated, dimly. *"My dog?"*

She nodded. "I've known all along. I remembered you from the waiting room that morning."

Sheepishly, he fumbled for a retort. He felt Robin Hood rubbing against his leg.

"Anyhow," he said grinning. "He is a boy. And his name's Robin Hood."

"Why'd you do it, Quinn?"

Why'd he do it? He had the retort for that. He had wanted to meet her. To marry her. To raise those six kids with her. So desperately, he had wanted to love her.

But why tell her that? She had been the smart girl. She had known all along; had seen through his scheme and even gone him one better on it. Snatching Robin Hood that way. Leaving him to hold hands with the terrier while she went out gallivanting with that Casanova Shipman. Forcing him to ruin his teeth with all that gooey candy.

And all the time she had been laughing up those luscious, bare arms of hers. From her viewpoint it was Quinn and his stale jokes. Oh, the funny, funny man. Trying to put one over on Joyce Greer. Trying to fall in love with her.

"Why'd I do it?" he said. He kept a grin on, even though the ache of it nearly tore his mouth apart. "I was doing research for this dog food company, see? Or maybe I was conducting a survey on whether angels have hearts. Tell me, Miss Greer. Do you have a heart? Statistics show that—"

"Quinn! Don't—"

"The idea held water though," he mused, as if to himself. "Like a sieve."

And then he looked at her. And as he stared, he began to see her. All at once, she was no longer an angel. Didn't her wings droop a little. Wasn't her halo on rather crookedly. . . That shape of hers that could bewitch a man . . . Those eyes that could possess him—

She was a hellborn spirit that wore the

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enticing smile of Satan! She was certainly no angel.

"Devil!" he swore, and then his hands were pinning her shoulders against the door, and his lips were crushing that smile off her face.

He kissed her again, and again, and again, and gradually her lips grew soft and supple under his, with all the resistance of butter to a flame.

When he let her go and stepped back, he was trembling.

"Well—nice to have kissed you, anyway," he muttered. "C'mon, Robin Hood."

The terrier followed docilely down the hall. Joyce took a few steps after him.

"No, wait, Quinn."

"What for?"

"I—I'd like to explain. I mean about Arthur and everything. And why I did what I did."

Her lips were moist, her eyes star-shiny. She could have fooled him. Sure. Any time, sister, but not now.

"Ah, the hell with it," he said.

TWO DAYS passed. By then he told himself he had almost forgotten Joyce. By then, also his tooth began aching. That damn candy! Three more days and he told himself he had almost forgotten Joyce even more. Which reminded him—

He picked up the phone and dialed Artie Shipman's office. When Laura answered, he curtly canceled his appointment for the following day.

"My tooth is killing me," he told her. "But I wouldn't go near that guy on a bet. Good-by."

"Quinn! Wait, please—" Laura's voice sounded frantic.

"Don't worry," he grumbled. "I'll take care of the bill."

"No, I didn't mean that. I mean—Look, Quinn, you'd better take care of that tooth of yours. How about if I make an appointment for you with Dr. Fisk in this same building?"

"Well—" He sure had to go to some dentist.

"Tomorrow morning at eleven," Laura said briskly, and hung up.

By the following morning, Quinn told himself he had completely forgotten. What was her name again?

At eleven, he walked into Dr. Fisk's reception room. There was one other patient. A woman. Buried behind a voluminous magazine. He took the seat across from her.

Confronting him were the back and front covers of *Rhubarb Growers Guide.* His glance strayed downward to a pair of crossed legs. Force of habit, of course. It hovered along the calf of one shapely limb, then pinned itself, horrified, to a slim ankle.

Unceremoniously, he jumped to his feet. He craned his neck. He sidled over as far as he dared. He squinted and peered. But she kept the magazine unwaveringly in position.

At least he thought it was her. Legs didn't lie. Or was it fingerprints, he wondered wildly. He sat down again and squirmed in the hard leather chair.

"Mr. McNeil," the elderly nurse said.

He followed her inside, looking back at the motionless figure behind the magazine.

"Who's that?" he whispered to the nurse, once they were in the dentist's chambers. "The other patient out there?"

"A Mrs. Edwards," she told him.

He hit bottom. "Seems to be very interested in rhubarb growing," he mumbled.

"Sit down," the nurse ordered.

He climbed into the chair, leaned way back. She adjusted the white towel under his chin and around his shoulders. Then she took a huge wad of cotton and thrust it into his mouth.

"Bite on that," she directed. "The doctor'll be right in."

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HE DID as he was told. In a few seconds the door opened, and closed. That would be the nurse leaving the room. The minutes passed. He wished he could have managed to get a good look at that Mrs. Edwards.

The door opened and closed. That would be Dr. Fisk.

Hands stole around his neck, locked themselves on his chest.

"Hello, Quinn."

She swung around so that she stood beside the chair, where he could get a tantalizing look at her.

He moved to get out of the chair, but her hands pressed firmly down on his chest and he remained where he was.

"No. You're going to listen to me for a change," she told him firmly. "Better still, you're going to answer my question."

Oh sure. He could tell her that already. Anything she wanted to know. The answer was "Mmmph."

She said, "Why'd you really do it, Quinn? I mean pull that stunt with the newspaper ad and Robin Hood and everything? Was it—" She looked almost shy. "Was it because you wanted to get to meet me?"

He tried to act sulky. He growled deep in his throat. He nodded.

She clapped her hands. "I think you're wonderful!" she exclaimed.

The office door opened, and closed. Dr. Fisk, who was a wisp of a little man with a scant fringe of hair on his head, said, "Good morning. And how is everybody today? How are you, Miss— And you, Mr. McNeil, isn't it?"

"Just perfect, thanks," Joyce said.

"Mmmph."

The dentist busied himself at the washbowl. Expertly, he dried his hands, then came over to the chair.

"Ah there—We'll just remove our wad of cotton, like this, and—"

"If you think I'm so wonderful," Quinn rapped out, his mouth unencumbered, "How come you treated me the way you did?"

"I beg your pardon," Dr. Fisk said.

Joyce pouted. "I had to teach you a lesson, didn't I? That you couldn't go around so indiscriminately flirting with strange girls! Trying to—practically pick me up, that's what. Pulling my leg that way!"

"Is that what he did?" the dentist asked appreciatively.

"She pulled mine," Quinn retorted. "But you weren't a strange girl! I mean —gosh, Joyce, I wanted to meet you."

"Well, did you have to be so cocky about it?" she asked lamely. "I just wanted to show you."

"Now which tooth was that again, young man?"

"Right here, Doc—And what about

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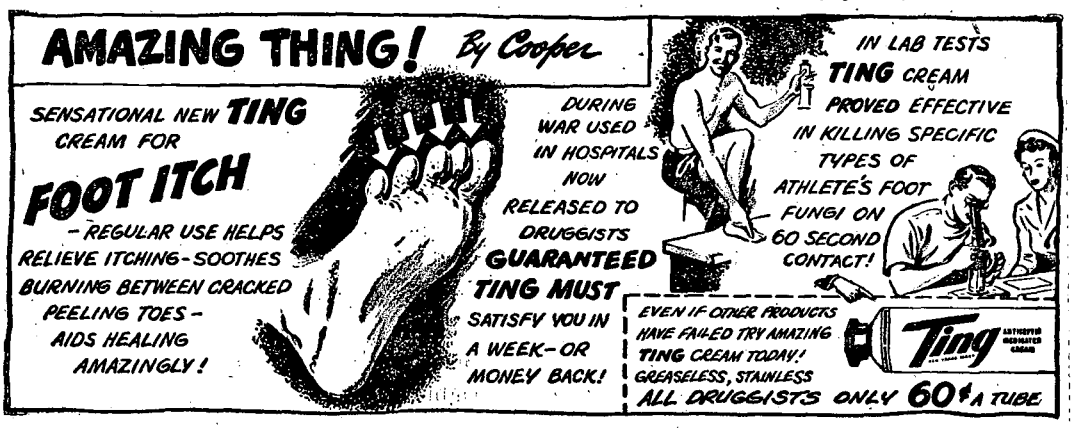
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Hearts Are Free

By HELEN AHERN

The eternal triangle was no novelty to Poppy.

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RIVER BEND drowsed in a noontime quiet that made Poppy Logan a conspicuous figure as she walked slowly down the main street of the small midwestern mill town.

It was the second time within an hour that she has passed the River Bend House. Masculine loungers on the hotel veranda eyed her with appraising interest, and across the street a group of women, bound for a meeting of the Ladies' Guild, pursed disapproving lips.

Poppy saw neither admirers nor critics. Her eyes, vividly sea-green between a tangle of black lashes, were fixed on a tall, slightly built young man, who was sauntering down the steps of the hotel.

Deliberately, she timed her pace so that she was in front of him when he reached the sidewalk, and a moment later Justin

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Wheeler's easy, friendly smile was flowing over her.

"Why, hello there, Poppy," he said, acting, as he always did, pleasantly surprised by the encounter.

Obviously he had no idea that she planned these daily meetings, knowing he lunched at the hotel. Had he suspected, he would rightfully have thought her insane, Poppy reflected.

But then her whole love for Justin Wheeler was insanity, hopeless, helpless insanity that stretched back over the years. She could not remember when she had not been in love with him. Even in grade school days he had seemed to her like a genial young prince.

He went on, still smiling the ready smile that his charm robbed of condescension. "How are things going? Found a job yet?"

Her heartbeat quickened to his interest, then quieted again as she reminded herself that Justin Wheeler made it a point to interest himself not only in the men who worked for the Wheeler Flour Mills, but in their families, too.

"Not yet," she said, adding quickly as he looked concerned, "but I have an interview with Mr. Spence at the bank on Monday. They can use another girl."

"Good. I only wish we needed another stenographer at the mills. I'll put in a word with Mr. Spence for you, though, if you wish."

"Would you?" Her face glowed beneath wind-blown dark curls.

"Of course," he told her. "I should have done so before, but I've been worried. Personal matters."

He lowered his voice, giving Poppy the sweet, excited sense of being taken in on a secret.

"I'm sorry," she said impulsively, noticing with sharpened vision that he did not seem quite his usual carefree self. Beneath his genial smile there were signs of strain in his young face.

At her unconsciously yearning tone, he looked a little startled. Then his boyish eyes warmed, as if he saw for the first time her slim, gypsy-like loveliness.

"You're a sweet thing, Poppy," he said, and under his awakened gaze, she could feel hot color sweep her face.

He, too, appeared to grow embarrassed. With a hasty "'Bye. Good luck with the job," he swung off toward the mill offices across the street.

She watched him until he vanished inside, carrying some of the glory of the July sunshine with him. Her lips as red as the flower whose name she bore, curved in a mirthless little smile of self-mockery as she continued down the street.

IT WAS ridiculous to let one man highlight her days, especially a man to whom she meant nothing, never could mean anything. It was not only that Justin was owner and manager of the flour mills in which her brother worked as a laborer, but Justin belonged to another girl. He made no secret of his infatuation for Winifred Vane, an ornamental member of his own set, and the public announcement of their engagement was expected any day.

But he had not looked like a happily engaged man today, Poppy thought and wondered if Winifred had anything to do with his worry. It was quite possible. Winifred was known to be a flirt, and had been engaged at one time to Justin's cousin.

And was not that same cousin, willful, wild Derek Reid, supposed to be returning to River Bend for the summer?

Absorbed in speculation, Poppy walked past the side street which led to the town flats where she lived with her brother and sister-in-law. Guided by subconscious purpose, her steps carried her out to where Main Street merged into the state highway.

A little way beyond was the old Reid house that had once been the home of both Justin Wheeler and Derek Reid. Even in abandonment it was a beautiful place, and

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Poppy liked to prowl its wooded, unkempt grounds. Circling the tottering picket fence, she found a familiar opening large enough to admit her slender body.

The garden where Derek and Justin used to play was a thicket of thorny rose bushes that scratched at her slim legs, but heedless of that, she moved on until she reached the drive that curved under the porte cochere of the big rambling house.

There she paused, startled by the sight of fresh tire marks in the gravel.

Gossip must be right then, she thought. Derek was returning, perhaps had already returned, to the old home that had been his sole inheritance from his grandfather's estate.

Curiosity held Poppy motionless for a minute.

There had been bad blood between the cousins ever since the reading of their grandfather's will which had given the mills and old man Reid's personal fortune to Justin and his mother. Derek had flung out of town the next day, leaving the inheritance and his fiancee, too. Whether Winifred had sent him away or not was uncertain, but anything might happen now if the handsome black sheep were really returning, and returning, it was said, with a very successful Broadway play to his credit.

Tensed and alert, Poppy gazed at the silent old house. Its windows were open to the warm July breeze. Undoubtedly some one was there and she knew that she ought to retreat.

But it was too late.

Even as she came to the decision, the door opened, silhouetting the figures of a lean, dark, good-looking man and a willowy blonde girl.

Derek and Winifred were back together on his first day in town!

Poppy stared. Oddly, she seemed to be seeing them through Justin's eyes, and an echo of what his hurt and resentment would have been, throbbed through her.

UNAWARE of her disapproval, Derek strolled forward to where she stood, looking like a wood nymph imprisoned by a shaft of sunlight. A crooked, audacious grin lighted his dark, cynical face.

"Hi there, Poppy," he said cheerfully. "It is Poppy Logan, isn't it? Even though you've grown up, I'd know your eyes anywhere. But what on earth are you doing here appearing out of the trees like a beautiful dryad? Are you a welcoming committee of one?"

"No!" Winifred spoke up shrewdly before Poppy could answer. "Can't you see she's here spying on me?"

"What do you mean?" Poppy stiffened. "Why should I spy on you?"

Winifred laughed contemptuously. "That's easy. Everyone in town knows that you're crazy about Justin."

"That's a—" Poppy started to say that it was a lie but the words choked in her throat.

The sneer on Winifred's coldly chiseled blonde face deepened and she added for Derek's benefit:

"It's almost pathetic the way she hangs around on Main Street waiting for a smile from my Justin. Just why I don't know."

"Neither do I, remembering my cousin." Derek's grin had faded, and his voice was acid. "Nor do I know why she should be here as a spy."

"I'm not!" Poppy flared, her face flaming with anger. "And I think you're both hateful. You must have something to conceal even to think of such a thing."

Then breathless from her outburst, she turned and ran down the tangled path.

"Poppy, wait! Please!"

Derek called after her sharply, his voice sounding remorseful, but she did not stop until she had slid through the pickets and gained the highway.

Shamed indignation winged her small feet and carried her swiftly back to town. Winifred's taunting accusations rang in her ears.

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Poor Justin! Remembering the deception that was being practiced upon him, she was stirred to fresh wrath against Winifred and Derek.

The years had not improved Derek, Poppy thought. He was the same brazen boy who had climaxed a series of escapades by smuggling a chorus girl into the dormitory at college. It was this prank that had caused him to be disinherited in favor of Justin.

Storming to herself, Poppy reached her own home. It was a small frame cottage so monotonously like its neighbors that she had to count the houses lining the block to make sure of its identity. Her brother, Jim, was already home for his early dinner and her sister-in-law's voice rose in a whine from the kitchen.

"Slaving my fingers to the bone, while she gallivants," Gina was saying, and Poppy knew that she was the subject of the harangue. She opened the screen door reluctantly.

"Now where have you been? Didn't you know that there was dinner to get?" Gina looked at Poppy accusingly. She was a plump, fading blonde and Poppy's slim youth was a constant irritation to her.

POPPY shrugged aside the questions and found an apron. She could have reminded Gina that she had prepared breakfast and lunch, bathed the two-year-old Logan twins and cleaned the house, but a glance at her brother's tired, prematurely aged face stopped her from useless argument.

"And Mrs. Holly, the Wheelers' housekeeper, was here to see you," Gina went on.

Poppy's sea-green eyes widened as she heard the name of Wheeler. "What about?" she asked apprehensively.

"To give you a job, although I suppose you'll be too uppity to take it. Not that it will hurt you to carry a tray and wash a few dishes for one evening. And I told her so!"

Poppy looked at her brother appealingly. "What's she talking about?"

"Seems like they want you to help out at a party Justin's mother is giving next Saturday," Jim said in a noncommittal voice.

"You mean to work as a maid?" In spite of herself, Poppy's voice showed her shrinking and Gina gave forth a triumphant cry.

"There! Didn't I tell you she was too good to earn an honest dollar? She'd rather eat off us."

"Come, come, Gina!" Jim spoke up reprovingly. "Poppy has paid us good board for a couple of years now. It wasn't her fault that the printing plant folded up and she lost her job."

"Yeah, but she hasn't paid board for a month now. She's just an expense, and what with the kids needing clothes—"

"I'll have another job next Monday maybe," Poppy put in quickly.

"Maybe." Gina sniffed disbelievingly. "And in the meantime you can pick up four or five dollars easy as nothing, unless you're scared to have Justin Wheeler see you in a cap and apron."

Poppy's face took on a badgered expression. It seemed as if the whole world were bent on deriding her for her foolish, humble passion for Justin.

"I don't care how he sees me," she cried. "And I'll take the job!"

"You don't have to wash the Wheelers' dirty dishes if you don't want to," Jim said gently.

She shook her black ringlets. If she worked at the Wheelers' party in a menial capacity, it might help to stop the humiliating gossip. Surely, if she were willing to appear as a maid before Justin, people could no longer accuse her of trying to make an impression on him.

If she were obliged to watch Justin devote himself all evening to Winifred, so much the better, she thought. It would be the punishment and possibly the cure for

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her aching love, although Poppy did not have really much hope for that. She had been in love with Justin too long. He was like a disease in her blood.

Besides, if Derek were there, as he probably would be, Justin might not have a chance to devote himself to Winifred. Anxiety for Justin mingled with quickened hope in Poppy's heart. She wondered what Derek would say when he saw her in maid's uniform. Certainly, he could not call her a beautiful dryad then.

THE MAID'S uniform was unexpectedly becoming, Poppy discovered, as she dressed in the Wheeler servant quarters on Saturday night. The simple black poplin dress outlined her slim figure provocatively, and the demure lace cap that perched on her dark curls served only to emphasize her vivid, gypsyish beauty.

She was half sorry to learn that she had been assigned to cutting sandwiches and polishing glasses in the butler's pantry, where she would be unseen and almost unseeing. Tantalizing snatches of music and laughter drifted in to her as she worked.

From time to time through the swinging door that led into the dining room, she could catch glimpses of the party as it milled around an improvised bar. Justin's stately, white-haired mother had thrown open for the occasion the whole enormous Wheeler house that topped fashionable River Hill. Everyone of social prominence in town seemed to be there.

Poppy had a fleeting picture of Winifred, exquisite in ice-blue satin, lifting a Martini glass in toast to someone, while at her elbow was Justin, his young face troubled and sulky. Then the door swung shut again, and it was several minutes before Poppy discovered that the cause of Justin's moodiness was Derek.

It was Derek to whom Winifred had been drinking. He leaned on the bar, looking handsome in a white summer coat, and very arrogant, it seemed to Poppy. As she watched, she saw him smile sardonically at Justin and Winifred, and again Poppy felt Justin's resentment flame up in her own heart.

"I'm surprised they invited that Reid man, even if he is a cousin," she said hotly to the housekeeper who was working beside her.

"And why shouldn't they?" Mrs. Holly looked up from the sandwiches with startling fierceness. "There's nothing wrong with young Derek, and I ought to know," she said. "I was nurse to him and that sniveling Justin, too. Derek is worth ten of Justin, no matter what his grandfather or anyone else thought. And proud I am that he's come back with money in his pocket and a name for himself."

She broke off as a call for fresh sandwiches came in, and for a while, there was silence in the stuffy pantry.

Poppy was stunned by Mrs. Holly's defense of Derek and her unflattering characterization of Justin. Sniveling! What a word to apply to a slim young dream prince. The old housekeeper must be getting into her dotage, Poppy thought, although she had to admit that Mrs. Holly could cut sandwiches and polish glasses more rapidly than she.

BY MIDNIGHT Poppy's arms ached and her head was throbbing from the heat and the noise of the party, which she was too tired to watch any longer. Mrs. Holly peered at her sharply.

"See here! You're all tuckered out," she said. "You'd better change your clothes and go home. The worst is over and I can manage with the regular help now."

Gratefully Poppy thanked her and made her way outside. But she did not go at once to the servants' quarters over the garage. She lingered in the drive, breathing deeply of the fresh night air.

Dance music, hauntingly lilting, reached her ears and drew her around the

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house into the formal garden, from which she could look into the brightly lighted ballroom. Standing on tiptoes, she picked out Justin. He was dancing with Winifred. Her ash-blonde head was close to the deeper gold of his, and he was holding her possessively.

She forced her gaze away from them, searched the swaying dancers for Derek's tall, white dinner-coated figure. But he was nowhere in sight. And all the time the orchestra was playing softly:

The night is young,
And I'm in love with you. . . .

The night was young, and Justin was in love with Winifred, Poppy was reminded as they drifted back into her line of vision and she saw him whisper the words of the song against Winifred's hair.

Poppy shut her eyes, giving herself up to numbing unhappiness, through which she heard only dimly the sound of quick footsteps on the turf behind her. She whirled, dismayed, as a low teasing laugh reached her ears.

It was a laugh that she knew belonged to Derek Reid, even before the moon, peeping from behind clouds, etched his lean body and dark, amused face in silver light.

He smiled down at her quizzically. "So the kitten is looking at the king again," he said, and shook his dark head at her. "A frightful waste of time, little Poppy."

"I don't care, and you haven't any right to laugh at me." She raised a defiant little face to which the vagrant moon lent an elfin, unearthly beauty. Derek's bright hazel eyes softened.

"I'm not laughing at you," he said gently. "I'm only trying to tell you that you're too lovely to be on the outside looking in on someone else's love affair. You should have a love of your own."

"And where would I find it?" she asked rebelliously.

He was silent for a moment while his eyes held hers. The music of the orchestra died away leaving the garden in odd, electrified stillness.

"Well," he said whimsically, "the night is young, and you're so beautiful, and I'm here."

Suddenly, his hands were on her shoulders, and he was pulling her to him, fire and laughter mingling in his hazel eyes. Then, so swiftly that she could not evade him, his mouth was on hers and he was kissing her. Lightly at first but with a sweet demand that wakened tingling nerves throughout her slender body.

She could feel herself going limp in his arms, feel her own lips open like a flower to his. In a surge of panic she tried to free herself from his embrace. Wildly her small hands beat against his chest, while Derek, laughing, only held her the more tightly.

"Don't do that," he said softly. "You liked being kissed, and you wouldn't mind if I kissed you again."

"I would! I would!" Poppy half sobbed, frantic because she realized there was more than a grain of truth in his words. "Let me go! Let me—"

"Yes! Let her go at once!"

Her hysterical protest was rather disconcertingly reinforced by a masculine command, while a masculine hand tugged at Derek's shoulder. With a cry half of relief, half of alarm, Poppy recognized Justin.

He had come up unheard, and stood glaring and pulling at Derek. A few feet away, Winifred watched with an unpleasantly calculating expression on her face.

Derek relaxed his hold on Poppy. "What's the idea, young Lochinvar?" he asked, turning to face Justin with a mocking smile which seemed to drive his cousin to frenzy.

Poppy was appalled by the rage that twisted Justin's boyish face. In a voice that shook with fury he demanded shrilly:

"Can't you even let my hired help alone? You chiseler!"

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As if denunciation failed him, he advanced, his arms flailing wildly at Derek. Winifred let out a little scream, and Derek, ducking the flying fists, said sternly:

"Cut it out, Just! Have you gone crazy?"

Justin seemed not to hear him, but lashed out again, crying:

"What did you come back here for? You're ruining everything for me. You meant to do that! And I'm going to kill you!"

ONE OF his fists grazed Derek's ear, and Derek's dark face hardened. Frightened, Poppy saw his lean body seem to coil. She tried to call a warning to Justin. Derek's fist, a hard, sure right, was already shooting out. With a thudding crack it caught Justin squarely on the jaw and he sprawled to his back in a bed of asters.

"You asked for it," Derek said, eyeing him with a wry smile.

"Yes, Justin, you fool!" Winifred edged closer and looked down at him scornfully. "Brawling over a servant girl!"

Poppy's eyes flashed, but her anger was lost in pity, as she saw Justin struggle to a sitting position. Derek laughed shortly and said in a dry tone to Winifred:

"That's hardly the whole story, Win, and it's not fair to Poppy."

"Oh, Poppy! I'm sick of her, hanging around making trouble. And I'm sick of him, too." She jerked away from Justin, who had risen and taken a hesitating step toward her.

Poppy's sea-green eyes flew open in shock and indignation. The last vestige of color had drained from Justin's face and he looked as if he might collapse again. Moved by uncontrollable, swelling pity, she caught his arm, steadying him as he staggered. Derek's hazel eyes, following her gesture, gleamed ironically.

Justin, however, did not immediately feel her sympathetic hand, but continued to stare pleadingly at the blonde girl.

"You don't really mean that?" he said.

"I do!" she told him. "You've shown yourself up for the silly boy that you are, so let me alone. Stick to your kitchen maid. She seems to appreciate you." Her gaze went meaningly to Poppy's hand which had tightened on his trembling arm.

Inside the ballroom, the orchestra was playing again. Soft rhumba rhythm throbbed through the emotion-laden darkness.

Justin straightened with an attempt at dignity that seemed pathetic to Poppy. She marveled that Winifred could remain so cold and implacable. Winifred had drawn nearer to Derek, allying herself with him, although Derek's dark lean face was inscrutable and uninviting.

"All right!" Justin accepted her dictate in a harsh, strained voice. "If that's the way you want it." Roughly, his fingers closed over Poppy's small hand.

Winifred gave Derek a triumphant glance. "You seem to have lost your pretty maid," she said. "Shall we go in and dance?"

Derek hesitated, his hazel eyes on Poppy. "How about it, Poppy? Shall we clear out?"

"I'm sure I don't care what you do," she said sharply, feeling that he was trying to turn her as well as Winifred from Justin. Justin did not seem like the genial, all-conquering dream prince now, but in his hurt need, he was even more appealing.

Derek smiled mockingly and a little pityingly. "In that case, on with the dance. Come, Winifred."

He linked his arm through hers, and the shadows swallowed them.

LEFT TO themselves, Poppy and Justin looked at each other uncertainly.

"You'd better go back to your guests," she said. "I'm going home."

"I'll drive you." His grip tightened on her arm. "I wish I never had to see any

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of them again. They've been snickering all evening, watching me being played for a fool. But I'll show them."

Stubbornly, he followed her around the house and waited, pacing the drive, while she changed from her maid's uniform to a little bolero-jacketed dress of dusty pink linen.

Poppy would have preferred to walk home and avoid the gossip and criticism that Justin's flight from his own party might bring upon her. But he hurried her into his coupe, ignoring her protests.

"Don't send me back to that mob," he said pitifully, and his air of needing her and wanting her made other considerations unimportant to Poppy.

"You do like me, don't you, Poppy?" he asked, as he sent the big car down the hill toward the Flats.

"Of course," she said gently.

"Better than Derek?" he persisted in a small boy way.

Poppy's heart-shaped face flushed in the darkness. "I don't think that I like Derek at all."

"You were letting him kiss you."

"I wasn't!" she cried, beginning to grow angry. "Why are you saying such things, asking me questions?"

He slowed the car and smiled at her, an unhappy little smile that tugged at her heart strings. "I feel sort of lost. Tell me again that you like me a lot, maybe love me a little."

The coupe slid to a stop under a towering elm, and he looked at her urgently, adding, "Winifred says that you do."

Poppy laughed, with a catch in her throat. "What difference does it make what Winifred says?"

"None," he agreed quickly. "I don't even want to think about her. Don't let me, Poppy. Make me think about you."

He was drawing her to him in something like desperation, his haunted blue eyes clinging to the scarlet loveliness of her mouth.

"Kiss me, Poppy, as you—"

As you did Derek! Poppy finished the sentence silently, and the thought of Derek chilled her soft lips for a moment and made them stiff and unresponsive under Justin's swift, fierce kiss. But he did not seem to notice.

"You're so sweet, Poppy," he whispered and, as if seeking a drug of forgetfulness, his mouth lingered on hers, draining the breath from her body. His heart thudded against her, and his arms strained her to him with a hungry, anguished passion that was impossible to deny.

Crazily, irritatingly, she thought of those other lips that had claimed hers in unhurried, sweet demand.

DEREK SEEMED to rise visibly between her and her dream prince. With a ragged, incredulous sob, she pushed Justin from her.

"It's wrong, all wrong," she said chokingly. "Please take me home."

He started the car a trifle sullenly. "Let down again!" he said.

"Don't say that." She smiled at him, a soft, coaxing smile. Then in the tone of a mother soothing a child, "I do like you, like you a lot, maybe love you!"

She made the confession with sweet, unselfish courage and was rewarded by the brightening of his clouded young face.

"You are sweet," he told her. Then, as he pulled the car up before the Logans' cottage, he added beseechingly, "And keep on loving me, Poppy. It helps."

Her sea-green eyes misted. It was strange and disturbing to have the boy whom she had idealized so humble, but her heart went out to him in a wave of yearning tenderness.

Poppy did not delude herself with hopes that Justin would make a place for her in his heart or his life, and she was not surprised when the following week brought no word from him.

For her part, she avoided the encoun-

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ters with him that she had once sought. She shunned Main Street although she now had a job and an excuse for luncheon hour strolls.

On Monday, Mr. Spence, the gray, withered manager of the River Bend bank, had given her a stenographic position. Whether Justin had spoken in her behalf, Poppy did not know. She was too glad to be working to care.

In the swift rush of hot summer days, the tumultuous events of Saturday night seemed like a dream. Justin's kiss might never have been. Derek's, too.

She could forgive Justin for kissing and forgetting. He had been almost out of his mind with pain and anger. But not Derek.

The memory of his carelessly given kiss rankled, and her cheeks burned as she remembered the strange response that it had roused in her. She had kissed him back like the cheap, common coquette he must have assumed her to be. She had a perverse wish to see him again, to prove to him that she could not be had for the taking. She must stop thinking of him.

FROM HER sister-in-law, who was an inveterate news gatherer, Poppy learned that Derek had established himself in the old Reid place for the summer and Mrs. Holly had left the Wheelers to take charge of his kitchen. Gina laughed when she told this tidbit.

"Quite a fella!" she observed. "Steals both his cousin's cook and his girl friend, or maybe they both just moved in on him. The night central down at the telephone company says Winifred Vane is wearing out the wires calling the Reid place at all hours. Guess she's sorry now she turned Derek down when he lost out with his grandfather. Looks like she's getting him back, though."

Poppy nodded agreement with an odd sensation of distaste. It was the same feeling that she had known twice before that week when she had seen Winifred going by in the front seat of Derek's big imported roadster.

It was really no concern of hers if Winifred rode with Derek. It was only on Justin's account that the sight disturbed her, Poppy told herself.

But she could not so easily explain the tremor of excitement that went through her when on Friday afternoon, just at closing time, the big roadster slid up in front of the bank with Derek, alone, at the wheel. Turning her back to the window, Poppy dawdled at her desk, waiting for him to go on.

He did not, however. He was waiting, she realized, when after a half hour he remained immovable, his eyes on the front door of the bank. With excitement growing unaccountably within her, she gathered up her hat and handbag. He could not be waiting for her, she insisted, forcing herself to walk outside calmly.

And yet he was!

"Hi, there! Why all the overtime?" Derek vaulted from the car and eagerly came forward to meet her. In the afternoon sunlight, he looked browned and vitally handsome.

"I was just about to come in and get you," he went on. "My winged Pegasus was growing impatient."

"But I didn't know—I didn't expect," she began.

"That I'd be champing at the bit outside your door?" He laughed. "To tell the truth I didn't know it myself until about an hour ago when the urge to look into a pair of green eyes became irresistible. So here we are, Pegasus and I, ready to take you wherever you wish."

He was guiding her toward the roadster as he talked, urging her in with a gay air that made resistance ebb out of Poppy.

"I ought to go home," she said, but not very firmly, and he grinned.

"Duty is no go on a night like this. It's too warm. Quite the night for a long cool drive along the River Road with a cold

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drink and a sandwich at the end of the trail."

The roadster was moving down Main Street, gathering speed. Poppy saw the flats rush past. Gina would be furious if she did not come home to help with dinner, but suddenly, the heat and confusion of the cottage seemed unbearable.

With a small sigh of involuntary contentment, she lifted her face to the cool breeze that swept in from the river. Now that he had gained his way, Derek lapsed into companionable silence, while Poppy let the wind blow through her hair.

THE SUN was red in the west and twilight was throwing purple shadows over the road before he slowed to swing the roadster between stone gates and up a hilly drive.

"Time out for food and a drink," he said in answer to Poppy's questioning glance. "Aren't you hungry?"

She did not know. It seemed to her that she could have gone on riding forever in the sweet gathering gloom. But it was pleasant, too, on the veranda of the inn that topped the hill.

"How did you ever find such a divine place?" she asked, as he seated her at a small table for two.

"Winifred dragged me out here a couple of times," he said carelessly. "The fried chicken is something to write home about."

He motioned to a waiter and did not see the swift clouding of Poppy's small face. He looked a little puzzled when he turned back to find her regarding him distantly.

"Now what have I done?" he asked with a rueful grin.

"Nothing, of course," she said, trying to shake off the chill that had crept over her at the mention of Winifred.

There was no reason why he should not have been there before with Winifred. She marveled that Winifred was not with him now.

He eyed her thoughtfully over a lime rickey. "You're a tantalizing person," he said, "with your unexpected withdrawals. One minute you seem to like me almost as much as I'm beginning to like you. The next minute you act as if I were the original carrier of athlete's foot. I can't make you out."

"Why try?" Her smile was deliberately provocative.

He did not answer immediately for the waiter was at his elbow to ask if they were ready for their dinner. Not until the fried chicken had been served and almost finished did he return to personalities. Then it was with a breathtaking counter question.

"Suppose I told you that I was falling in love with you?"

Her heart skipped a beat, but she forced herself to laugh.

"I'd say you were crazy. You have only seen me twice since I've grown up."

"And kissed you once," he reminded her, while her face flamed under the challenge in his hazel eyes.

He went on impetuously, "Time doesn't seem to matter to love. Nothing seems to matter, not even the fact that you prefer my cousin to me. If anything, it only makes me more determined to wake you up."

"I see," she said, locking her hands under the table to hide their sudden trembling. Her voice was frigid, for with sickening clarity, that purpose beneath his whimsical love-making revealed itself. He was simply using her to strike another blow at Justin and avenge the loss of his inheritance. If he could, he would take from Justin the slim consolation of her hero-worshipping love, even as he had taken Winifred.

"What do you see?" Derek asked, his hazel eyes narrowing.

"That you hate your cousin and that you'll do anything to get even."

"You blind little idiot!" He looked at her disgustedly, his mouth tightening into

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a thin hard line. "Don't you ever think for yourself? Don't you realize that you're wasting your life and your youth on illusions and dreams that can never come true?"

"What if I am?" she cried. Anger coursed through her, as she thought how nearly his magnetism had tricked her into playing his cruel game against Justin. "I'm not Winifred. Let her help you hurt Justin. I won't! And now you had better take me home."

He bowed assent, his dark face ironical, and called for his check.

Outside, the moon had come up but there was no witchery in its pale golden light. All the enchantment of the afternoon was gone.

SHE SAT deep in her own corner of the seat and listlessly watched the miles roll by. Her anger had faded, leaving her tired and dispirited. Derek drove grimly, while the moon peering through the interlacing branches of trees made a hard white cameo of his stern profile.

In silence, he stopped before her brother's cottage, slid from beneath the wheel and opened the door of the roadster for her.

"It's been very pleasant," she said, beginning mechanical, conventional thanks.

He stopped her sharply. "It hasn't! It might have been, but you wouldn't let it."

"*I* wouldn't let it!" she flared with an unreasoning wrath that seemed to amuse him.

A little quirk of laughter appeared at the corner of his mouth. "What a little spitfire you are! But what a sweet little spitfire."

Then, as on that other night in a moonlit garden, he had her by the shoulders, holding her immovable while his eyes traced her small face, feature by feature.

She swayed dizzily in his tight grip. His fingers seemed to burn into her flesh and the warm July night was closing in smotheringly around them. Slowly he drew her to him. His mouth, quivering a little hovered over hers for timeless seconds.

Then, relentlessly, irresistibly, it found hers in a long kiss that was like a white hot flame against her lips, a flame that made her melt to his embrace. A flame that made her slim hands want to steal up to encircle his neck.

With the last remnants of her will power, she jerked her mouth from his, but it was like tearing asunder living, throbbing tissue that bound her to him. She fought a crazy impulse to throw herself against him and pull back to her the arms that had dropped abruptly.

She stood there trembling, unable to meet his eyes. His mouth was bitter again, as was his voice.

"I didn't mean to do that, Poppy," he said penitently. "Consider it my farewell."

"You're going away?" she asked, startled.

He smiled remotely. "Not very far. I'll be down the road a few more weeks if you ever finish with dreams and want me. But I'm not going to try to compete with your blind, distorted loyalty to my cousin. Good-by!"

He turned on his heel and climbed back into the car. A minute later, it was roaring down the street.

She let herself into the cottage fumblingly. Tears poured down her cheeks, tears that she could not explain. Derek's good-by rang in her ears. It had been a strange good-by, an infuriating good-by, a frank admission that he was through with her unless she would play his game against his cousin. As the realization came to her, she tried to staunch her foolish, welling tears but they kept on flowing as if they would never stop. Her heart was a hard, aching lump in her throat that made it impossible to answer Gina who called out:

"A fine time of night to be coming home. Whose car was that I heard?" Then, as Poppy was silent, she uttered a

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disgusted sound. "Well, keep your mouth shut, go your own way. But mark my words, no good's going to come of running around with the swells."

Poppy closed the door of her bedroom on the complaining voice. Gina was right. No good would come of association with Derek or Justin, either.

Her tears dried and her soft mouth grew firm. She was through, she resolved, through with reaching toward a world in which she was only a pawn and which had brought her nothing but unrest and aching, unfulfillable desires.

Feeling bruised and exhausted, but strong in her determination to forget both men, she fell into dream-ridden sleep.

IT WAS easier to make resolutions than to keep them, Poppy found the next noon when she came from around one of the teller's cages to find Justin waiting by her desk in the outer office of the bank.

He looked paler and more worn even than she remembered him, and she faced him with quick concern. He was eyeing her reproachfully.

"So you did let me down after all," he said without preliminary. Then through her startled protest, he went on:

"You were out with my cousin last night. I know because I saw you in his car."

Her sea-green eyes darkened. Even her romantic, idealizing love could not stop her from seeing that he was being flagrantly unfair and unreasonable. Unexpectedly, Mrs. Holly's word, "sniveling," darted into Poppy's mind.

"What of it?" she asked.

"Didn't it mean anything to you that you were one person whom I trusted? One person whom I was sure Derek couldn't turn against me?"

"But he didn't turn me against you. He simply took me for a ride in his car."

"I'd have taken you for a ride, if I had known you wanted one. I've got a car, too, even if it isn't as big as his," Justin said boyishly. "And I'll take you for a ride today."

She smiled faintly. "That isn't necessary, Justin."

"But I want to," he said. "It's Saturday, a half-day, isn't it?"

"Yes, but—" She thought of her resolutions.

"You'll ride with Derek, but you won't ride with me. Is that it?" He studied her bitterly.

She frowned, then smiled again. What a spoiled boy he was! But he was also a hurt boy, she knew. There was pain beneath the sulkiness in his blue eyes that made her say gently:

"Of course, I'll go for a ride with you, if you really want me to. I'll be through here at one."

"That's more like it. I'll be outside," he promised, and left her with an oddly triumphant air.

THINKING about it as she hurried through the last of her letters, Poppy began to suspect that he had more than a casual drive in mind.

"Where are we going?" she asked a trifle nervously when a few minutes after one, Justin put her into his coupe.

He slanted her a guarded blue glance, as he shifted gears and turned the car up River Hill. "I thought we might run out to the country club."

"The country club!" It was the last place that she had thought he would take her since it was the place where they would meet all his friends. The place where he would meet Winifred! But that, no doubt, was exactly what he wanted. He wanted to flaunt her in front of Winifred and Derek.

Indignation succeeded Poppy's first elation. "It's a ridiculous idea," she said. "I don't know the crowd, and I'm not dressed right."

"You look all right to me." His eyes

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slid over her approvingly, and she had to acknowledge that her objection about clothes was feeble. She was wearing a typical country club outfit, a smart, if inexpensive suit of navy-blue sharkskin accented by a scarf that matched the scarlet of her lips.

Justin went on persuasively, "And don't worry about the crowd. You're not afraid of any of them, are you? Of my cousin Derek, for instance?"

"No, certainly not!" she cried in a passion of protest, although deep within her was the shamed knowledge that she had been shrinking from meeting Derek, dreading to see him with Winifred.

Stricken to silence by the discovery, she made no further objections, and with a look of brooding anticipation in his eyes, Justin drove on rapidly.

The terrace of the exclusive River Bend Club swarmed with a gay Saturday afternoon crowd. Boldly Justin led Poppy between chattering, staring groups of girls in flower-hued dresses and casually dressed men. Almost too boldly. His swaggering, defiant manner seemed to say:

"Look what I've picked up!"

Poppy's cheeks burned as he seated her at a centrally located table. She concentrated on the menu, not daring to look over the crowd.

Justin was doing enough looking for two. His eyes seemed to dart in all directions at once, and she knew that he was searching for Winifred. Their impatient waiter had to ask him twice what he wished to drink.

"Martinis. Stiff ones," he said impatiently, and returned to his quest.

But it was Poppy who finally saw Winifred, lovely in a dress of pale green crepe, stroll in from the golf course. Beside her was Derek.

Over the sea of terrace tables, his hazel eyes found Poppy's, and the familiar, ironical challenge in their depths made her heart begin to thud. She knew that she ought to warn Justin that Winifred was here, that she and Derek were right behind, heading for a table only a few feet away. But a curious paralysis held her throat muscles rigid.

JUSTIN discovered them for himself with a start, as Derek paused by their table with an easy, "Hiya, Poppy? Howdy, my dear cousin."

Poppy managed to answer, but Justin could only swallow speechlessly, his tortured gaze clinging to Winifred's aloof mocking face.

"Isn't this amusing?" she said, her eyes sliding over Poppy. "You do get around, don't you?"

Giving Poppy no chance to retort, she moved on. Justin sank back into his seat, crushed.

"Drink your martini," Poppy said, trying to distract him from his anguished

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contemplation of the other couple who were seating themselves and ordering drinks with callous obliviousness to his misery.

He seemed not to hear her, but continued to stare in a way that would surely attract attention. Embarrassed and apprehensive, Poppy reached over and touched his arm.

"Don't let them see how you feel," she urged. "Let's go, please."

He hesitated, then agreed feverishly. "Yes, yes! I can't stand it, sitting here, watching."

Like a man in a daze, he yielded himself to Poppy's guidance, and they found their way to his coupe. Once behind the wheel, his miserable apathy left him, and madness took possession of him. He shot the car down the clubhouse drive, barely missing the gates.

"Justin!" Poppy cried. "Be careful!"

But he only gave the coupe more gas. They turned into the road leading back to River Bend with the needle of the speedometer quivering around seventy-five, climbing to eighty.

Her heart leaped to her throat, and she clutched at her hat.

"Are you trying to kill us?" she screamed, above the roar of the wide-open motor, as they took a curve and the coupe trembled on a soft shoulder, threatening to topple.

"Maybe. Who cares?" he demanded through tight-drawn lips.

She stared at him in mingled fear and outrage. "Justin, you're crazy! And you haven't the right to do this to me. Stop, I tell you!"

Her voice, crackling in command, seemed to penetrate his selfish frenzy. He took his foot from the accelerator, letting the car slide to a stop at the side of the road.

He looked at her in sullen apology. "I forgot that you might want to live," he said.

"And don't you?" she asked sharply. "For heaven's sake, Justin, what good would it do if you cracked up your car and killed yourself?"

He eyed her moodily. "None, I suppose," he admitted. "But that cousin of mine is driving me insane. And I'll either have to kill myself or kill him."

"Nonsense!" Poppy tried to speak scoffingly but she was frightened by the gleam in his blue eyes.

He went on, hysteria creeping back into his voice. "I can't stand it, I tell you. I hate him! I've always hated him, and he knows it. He'll take everything from me if he can, my money, my position, Winifred."

He choked over her name. Then, unexpectedly, to Poppy's dismay, he slumped across the steering wheel and buried his face in his arms, his shoulders shaking as rasping sobs tore themselves from his throat.

She had never seen a man cry before and the sight made her feel sick all over. Pityingly, although with dawning repugnance, she laid a hand on his tumbled blond hair.

"Don't, Justin," she begged. "You're imagining things about Derek. Anyhow there must be something you can do."

"Sure there is!" He lifted his head and glared at her with wet, wild eyes. "I can shoot him down like the treacherous, vindictive dog that he is. And I will!"

"Hush!" She drew away from him, shuddering.

GONE completely was the dream prince who had captured her young heart. In his place was a spoiled boy whom frustration had driven to mania. Her dream castle crumpled around her, leaving her suspended in blank, empty space.

But she had no time to dwell on lost illusions. Even as she was compelled to despise Justin, she recognized that he was dangerous and tried to soothe him.

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"That's foolish talk," she said. "There are better ways to get Winifred back. I'll think of one. I'll help you."

"What can you do?" he asked scornfully.

"I don't know yet," she said, but back in her mind a shadow of a plan was forming. "Just trust me."

"I've got a sweet little .32 revolver I'd rather trust," he declared with a high, wild laugh, and she shuddered again uncontrollably.

She could not get either that laugh of his or his mad threat out of her mind. All during dinner, back in the humdrum routine of the Logan cottage, she kept hearing them. Reluctantly she began to see what she must do.

Presumptuous and futile as it might be, she must go to Derek and beg him to give up Winifred for Justin's sake. But more for his own sake.

In his present mood, Justin was quite capable of trying to injure his cousin. Fearful pictures of him, gun in hand, seeking out Derek, shooting him down, danced before her. The blow-out of a tire in the street, horribly reminiscent of a revolver shot, brought a scream to her lips, and galvanized her into action.

Without stopping, either for a hat or to answer Gina's curious questions, she raced outside.

The night was hot and moonless with a threat of rain in the air, and the highway that led to the old Reid place wound inkily between towering, still trees. Unheeding of the heat or the blackness, Poppy ran almost the whole distance, spurred by a premonitory conviction that Justin was already on his way to settle the score with his cousin.

PANTING AND breathless she hurried through the open gates and up the front walk. There she stopped with a little sob of relief escaping her.

Safe and sound on his own front porch was Derek. Not only safe and sound, but almost aggravatingly at ease. In the light of an open window she could see him stretched out on a porch swing smoking a cigarette that made a glowing point of red in the darkness.

The sense of impending disaster left her and she stood uncertain, half tempted to go away without making herself known. But Derek's very unawareness of danger was a hazard, she decided on second thought.

She plunged up the walk, her heels clicking on the flagstones and bringing him to a sitting position.

"Poppy—my dear!" He jumped up in surprise as she reached the steps and was revealed by the light from the front door. With stars of wondering delight dancing in his eyes he leaped forward to meet her and drew her up the steps and into the house. It was a hospitable old place, thick-walled and cool in spite of the heat of the outdoors.

Sinking into a deep comfortable chair that Derek pulled forward, she again felt the absurdity of her mission and delayed explanations to enjoy the peace and mellow loveliness of Derek's living room.

The furniture, polished to satiny beauty, was that of a gracious by-gone age. There were flowers everywhere, tall vases of larkspur and graceful cosmos. And poppies. A great bowl of them flamed on an end-table at her elbow.

Following the direction of her gaze, Derek smiled. "Your flowers, Poppy. I've been keeping them here in honor of the day when you might come."

He was hovering over her, happily and solicitously. "You're warm and tired," he said, noticing the damp curls that clung to her forehead. "But we'll remedy that." He raised his voice and called to Mrs. Holly to bring them a pitcher of lemonade and lots of ice.

"Why didn't you telephone me," he asked, turning back to Poppy, "and let me come for you?" He paused, adding in

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a soft earnest tone that was like the bow of a violin drawn across her heart strings, "Don't you know I would come for you any time, anywhere?"

Her head whirled. Panic and exhilaration were sweeping her in alternating waves. His nearness and tenderness were suffocatingly sweet. All that she had planned to say had suddenly fled from her and she was conscious of an aching desire to bury her face in the warm throbbing hollow of his brown throat.

Only the sound of jerky, hard footsteps on the porch outside saved her from complete helpless surrender.

Instinctively, she knew that they were Justin's and his name broke from her in a stricken whisper. She looked at Derek, aghast.

"Oh, Derek, I should have told you, that's what I came for, to warn you, to beg you—"

"You came on Justin's account?" he demanded, paying no attention to the door bell that pealed peremptorily through the peaceful house.

"Yes, yes!" she said frantically.

"And I thought —Oh, what's the use?" He broke off with a short harsh laugh and swung away from her to face the hall.

Mrs. Holly, lemonade pitcher in hand, was scurrying to the door. As she opened it, they heard her say disapprovingly, "Now what, young man?"

THE NEXT instant, Justin lunged into the room, his youthful face distorted and his blue eyes gleaming. His right hand was jammed into his coat pocket, which showed an enormous bulge.

"Watch him, Derek!" Poppy cried. "He has a gun."

"Sure I have a gun." Justin's eyes flashed to her viciously. "And I'm set to use it on anyone who gets in my way. So keep out of this, you little double-crosser."

She shrank back from his demoniacal rage, while Mrs. Holly, listening open-mouthed in the doorway, screamed thinly and let the lemonade pitcher slide to the floor with a crash of glass. Only Derek remained unconcerned.

He walked up to his cousin contemptuously. "What's on your mind? Or haven't you any mind left?"

Justin's lips drew back from his teeth with a nervous twitch that gave his face an animal-like expression. "Go on, poke fun at me," he said hoarsely. "You'll never have another chance."

"You still haven't told me what you want," Derek reminded him with insulting coolness.

Justin glared, and Poppy could see his hand move in his pocket. She stifled a scream.

"You know what I want. I want to be let alone. And I want Winifred. For the last time, are you going to give her up?"

"Give her up?" Derek's eyebrows lifted sardonically. "I doubt, Justin, if it's in my power to give her up."

He cared then for Winifred, Poppy thought, while something warm and sweet within her seemed to shrivel and die.

Justin greeted the announcement with a shrill cry of rage. "You mean you won't! Well, you've had your chance. Now—" His hand jerked from his pocket. Lamplight gleamed on a small, pearl-handled revolver.

Derek looked down at it, unmoved and unmoving. "You'll hurt someone with that pop-gun," he said dryly.

To Poppy, his lack of concern seemed horribly suicidal and it was maddening to Justin. She saw him begin to shake, saw his nervous fingers tighten on the butt of the revolver. She heard Mrs. Holly scream again. Justin's forefinger was on the trigger—twitching!

Poppy waited no longer. She flung herself forward squarely between the two men. She might have struck the revolver. She could not tell. The muffled blast of the gun filled the room. She was only

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conscious of a stab of pain in her shoulder.

Briefly, Derek's face, white and horrified, floated before her, and she felt herself sinking into his arms. Out of a creeping darkness, she heard Justin crying:

"God! I've killed her! What will I do?"

Poppy had a queer tired desire to comfort him, to tell him that she did not mind dying, not if she could die like this with Derek's arms around her.

But she could not speak. The darkness was thickening, was engulfing her.

SHE CAME back to half-consciousness to find herself lying on a strange bed in a masculine-looking room. There seemed to be a vast number of people around her, but really there were only four—Mrs. Holly, a rotund little man whom she placed wearily as the local doctor, Justin, and Derek.

From beneath heavy lashes that she seemed unable to lift, she looked at them and tried to remember what had happened. Her shoulder hurt, and she could hear from a long way off the echo of a revolver shot in her ears.

"She's coming out of it, and a lucky thing for you, Justin Wheeler," she heard Mrs. Holly say. "Maybe this will teach you not to go running around with guns every time you don't get your own way."

Memory began to come back to Poppy. Justin had tried to kill Derek, she recalled, and she had got in the way. She had thought that she was dying in Derek's arms.

But people did not die so easily, it seemed. The doctor was saying crisply, "Nothing but a flesh wound. She'll be all right in a day or two. And as for you, Wheeler, I hope it was an accident as you say."

"Oh, it was!" Poppy forced herself to open her eyes and speak. Instantly they were all bending over her, Mrs. Holly and the doctor and Justin. And Derek.

She wished they would go away and leave just Derek, whose eyes, brightly hazel with relief, shone down into hers for a long sweet moment. But that was a foolish wish, she knew immediately as memory, almost too clear, brought back Derek's declaration that he could not give up Winifred. He was only glad that she had not been killed on his premises.

"Well, accident or not," the doctor said, "you had a fortunate escape, young lady."

"Yes, yes!" Justin broke in feverishly. "I'll never forgive myself, Poppy. I'll do anything—"

"Don't worry, please." Poppy smiled reassuringly into his white, frightened face.

Then the doctor herded them all from the room. He gave her something that would make her sleep again.

The sun was shining when she wakened for a second time to find only Justin in the room. As Poppy's eyelids fluttered upward, he came over and knelt beside the bed.

In the bright morning light, he looked beaten and haggard.

"Feeling better?" he asked timidly.

"Much better," she assured him, and she did. She felt almost normal except for an ache in her shoulder, and an ache in her heart. But the ache in her heart was not his fault, she realized dimly.

"Gee, Poppy, I'm sorry for this, and I meant it when I said that I'd do anything to make it up to you," he told her in a dogged sort of rush.

"There's nothing to make up for, Justin. If I had kept out of the argument, probably nothing would have happened. Forget it, please."

"I can't." He looked at her determinedly. "And I'm here to make amends not only for hurting you, but for what I thought and said. Derek has told me how wrong I was, and that you were only here on my account. I'm sorry, and I want you to marry me." He brought the last out breathlessly.

She stared at him, her sea-green eyes

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enormous with amazement. She wondered if she were delirious from her wound.

"To marry you?" she gasped.

"Yes." The doggedness in his face increased. "Why not? You loved me once."

"But you don't love me." She studied him wonderingly, more than ever convinced that one of them was mad. "You're not trying to tell me that you do, are you?"

He hesitated a minute, swallowing hard. "Yes, I am," he said finally. "And you simply must marry me, Poppy."

HIS VOICE took on a desperate note, and her bewilderment grew. "What about Winifred?" she asked quietly, and saw him wince.

"Leave her out of this," he said roughly. "This is between you and me. It's you whom I'm asking to marry. Why must we argue? Don't you want to marry me?"

He leaned over her with an odd mingling of hope and anxiety in his blue eyes, as she was silent, listening to her heart which cried violently, "No!"

"No, I don't want to marry you, Justin," she said at length. Then, softening her refusal, "I did love you, but it was a young kind of love, not enough for marriage."

"You mean that?" He straightened up, relief showing through his surprise. Then, as she nodded firmly, "Will you tell that to Derek?"

"Derek? What has he got to do with it?" she asked.

He flushed uncomfortably. "Well, you see, there was some mix-up about our grandfather's will. Derek's got me on the spot and he threatens to take everything if I don't fix things up with you."

"In other words, you were ordered to marry me." Her eyes began to flash. "But why?"

"That's not hard to guess." Justin eyed her unhappily. "My cousin wants a clear field with Winifred."

"Of course," Poppy said, her lips twisting in a bitter little smile.

Anger whipped color into her pale cheeks. Justin had risen to his feet, his blue eyes bright with renewed hope.

"You'll tell him, Poppy," he said again, "just what you told me, that a marriage between us is no go?"

"I certainly will." Her voice was shakily grim. "Send him in."

JUSTIN WENT out briskly, like a man reprieved from a death sentence. Listening intently, she heard him speak to someone in the hall. Derek must have been waiting just outside the door to learn the results of his scheme. Her small hands clenched as bitterness lashed her afresh.

The door was swinging open. Moving in long swift strides, Derek was in the room, standing over her.

"What's this?" he demanded. "What does Justin mean by saying that you won't marry him? Didn't he—"

"Didn't he ask me properly?" Her lips curled. "He did. Like the well-punished little boy that he is. So don't blame him."

Derek's hazel eyes clouded with incomprehension. "But I thought it was what you wanted. I was trying to do my best for everyone."

Her mirthless little smile deepened. "For yourself and Winifred, you mean, don't you? Why not admit that you simply wanted to make things easier for you and Winifred?"

"For me and Winifred?" He stared blankly.

His pretenses were unbearable, Poppy thought, flaring. "Isn't it obvious that you wanted me to get Justin out of your way? It didn't matter to you that I don't love him, and he doesn't love me. All you thought of was your own love."

"My love for whom?" he demanded.

"Why, for Winifred! You can't deny that you love her and want to marry her."

"But I do deny it!" he said explosively.

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"I don't love her, and I wouldn't marry the little hell-cat if she were the last woman on earth."

Poppy gasped, and the room reeled around her. Disbelief and wondering gladness chased themselves across her small face.

"But you said you couldn't give her up," she faltered.

He dropped suddenly to his knees, and took her hands in his.

"Listen, little Poppy. I couldn't give her up because I didn't even want her. I haven't for a long time, not since she threw me over when she thought my grandfather had disinherited me. It amused me for a while to torment Justin by stringing along with her because he had played a rotten trick on me."

"Something about the will, isn't it?"

He nodded, smiling wryly. "Yes, he told my grandfather that I was mixed up in that silly college scrape, although Justin was in it deeper than I. Anyhow the old man got sore and disinherited me. But he found out the truth before he died and made a later will, which I knew about and found. In the meantime, Winifred had broken our engagement, and money didn't seem important for a while."

"You loved her so much?" Poppy asked, trying vainly to draw her fingers from his.

"In a school boy way. I was more in love with love than with her, but disillusionment is hard to take when you're very young. I rushed off in a huff, leaving her and the mills to Justin. I never did want to become a River Bend business man, and I made a fair pile of dough on my latest play. I had no idea of bothering Justin either in his business or love affairs when I came back."

"But you were always with Winifred," Poppy said doubtfully.

HE GRINNED. "That wasn't my fault. Ungallant as it sounds, I'll have to tell you that I never was with her when I could escape, except when I was trying to keep her out of your way. She had a crazy notion that since I had made money, she would patch things up between us. When she discovered that I was falling in love with you, it only made her the more determined."

"Falling in love with me!" Poppy repeated the words softly, letting them chime against her ears.

"Don't you remember that I told you so? But you wouldn't believe me." He stopped for a moment and slipped his arm beneath her very carefully not to hurt her injured shoulder. Then, with his face close to hers, he whispered, "Would it do any good to tell you again that I have fallen in love with you?"

"Any good! Oh, Derek—" Her voice trembled off in a sigh of ecstasy, while her sea-green eyes, lifted shyly to his, filled with glory.

He cradled her in his arms, and then with slow, sweet passion, he was kissing her, murmuring tenderly:

"Darling, darling, I've waited so long, hoping against hope to hold you like this. You are all mine, aren't you, flaming, gorgeous, little Poppy?" He raised his lips to her rapturous face.

"All yours, Derek. There's really never been anyone else since that first night when you kissed me. Only I was blind."

"And I've been even blinder. To think I tried to make you marry someone else," he said ruefully. "But I wanted you to be happy, Poppy, even if it meant giving you up."

"Oh, my love, how could you have thought I'd be happy without you?" she asked, reaching up with sweet abandon to draw his brown face back to hers.

"Then you'll be happy forever, for I shall be with you forever," Derek told her. And under the fiery promise of his kiss, the heart of Poppy soared into the magic world of love where lay the answers to all life.

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By HOPE CAMPBELL

The Bride Regrets

Lorraine couldn't live with —nor could she live without—Terry!

THE MINUTE Lorraine topped the crest of the hill, she could see that not one thing had been done all day. Below her, no smoke curled from the chimney of the small white house, the three white-faced heifers pressed wistfully against the fence separating them from the water tank, the chickens huddled in the corner of their pen nearest the house, watching the back door expectantly, and in the vegetable garden weeds flourished, green and untouched, where clean dark earth should have showed.

Lorraine's richly curved mouth tightened and tears of sheer exasperation misted her dark blue eyes. She just stood there, a slender girl dressed with New York career girl smartness in a gray suit and red blouse, the New Jersey dust she had picked up walking from the station on her small gray pumps. Then she jerked up her shining black head and blinked back the tears. A bad day at the office, she excused, and marched down the hill.

As she walked up the drive, Lorraine could hear the piano but she ignored it. Tense with repressed anger, she went straight to the back, swung open the gate for the heifers, got the chicken feed and scattered it, and finally detoured for one grim look at the garden, where the carrots had grown too large for eating and weeds rioted.

Then she walked into the house through the kitchen door and stopped again, feeling the suppressed rage welling up in a silent shriek. The breakfast dishes still cluttered the sink where she had stacked them before she raced out to catch the train for work and empty beer bottles covered the drain board.

From the living room, Terry sang, his voice carefree as a bird's trilling, "Da da, da Da, da Da da, Da da Da, daaaa."

"Ooooh," Lorraine breathed furiously and slammed open the door and walked across the living room.

At the grand piano, Terry's fingers mocked the click of her high heels on the bare boards, mocked merrily and liltingly. "Home already, darling? I didn't know it was so late," he said, without looking around.

For a dozen heartbeats, she couldn't speak. Even after nearly six months of marriage and disillusionment, the very sight of Terry could still do that to her. Even his back, the broad shoulders tapering sharply to a slim waist and the taffy fair hair looked so clean somehow, Lor-

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Terry grinned as he said, "You can't make a country boy out of a Broadway character."

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raine thought with a despairing, sinking feeling in her heart, so like a scrubbed and immaculate small boy, always sweet and smiling and quite certain the world couldn't help being pleased with him even if he had just dumped all the ashtrays in the middle of the living room carpet. That was Terry, completely charming and completely loveable.

And completely impossible. Completely irresponsible. Completely no account as a husband.

"It's late, all right," she said grimly.

HE JERKED around, brown eyes widening in the bronzed face which made his hair seem even lighter. "Rough day at the office?" he asked solicitously, jumping up. "Sit down and let me get you a beer."

"It looks to me like somebody had a lot of beers around here today," she said, facing him without moving, fists clenched and black head high.

"Oh, you know Pete," Terry said lightly. "He's got to have his beer."

"So he was out here today?"

"Just left. Sorry to have missed you and all that, but he had to get back for the dinner show. But how do you like this?"

Lightly, his fingers went da Da, da Da, da Da da. Catchy and gay, hummable, Lorraine thought involuntarily, and then her lovely face set. All Terry's tunes were good. And he hadn't made a penny out of even one song since they got married.

"Never mind that," she said stonily. "I can tell you a lot of things I don't like. What have you done all day?"

"Why, I wrote this," he said, brown eyes widening, and fingers still on the piano. "I've been kicking it around for a week and then Pete pitched in and finally it came up good."

"And the heifers came up thirsty and the chickens, hungry, and you didn't touch the garden and how about the fireplace? I told you to light it and see if the flu works now."

Terry grinned, ruefully and charmingly and one-sidedly. "Darling, I got to working and just plain forgot."

"Working!" she said, the word a small explosive sound on her full red lips. "Working! Loafing around with Pete and, if it isn't Pete, some of the rest of that choice collection of bums you call friends. Loafing! That's all it was. Terry, I'm fed up. I've done everything I can, night and day, twelve hours a day, seven days a week. And I can't go on."

"Look," he said reasonably, "I fought moving out here from the first. I never did fall for that five-acres-and-independence gag and I hate commuting. And I certainly didn't want you to go back to work at that law office. Especially for Paul. I remember that you two were engaged when we met. But you had to have it. You were set on it."

"I had to be set on it," she cried, eyes flashing. "What was I going to do? You won't work. You won't do anything but write those darn songs that never bring in a penny and don't remind me that you used to be a big success. All I've seen of that success are the debts you rolled up, still trying to live like a millionaire with no money coming in. Any responsible man would have got a job and if you still want to fool around with the piano, you could do it week-ends."

"Song writing isn't quite like that," he said, his voice too soft.

"So you say. All I know is that my salary alone won't keep us going. I thought moving out here would cut expenses but now you won't even help with the chores."

Terry grinned wryly. "You can't make a country boy out of a Broadway character."

"So I've found out," Lorraine said scathingly and was shocked to realize she was shaking all over with rage. "I don't

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know whether you're plain lazy or just don't care. But it's killing me. I can't go on."

"Wonderful," he boomed. "Let's start packing. Back to the hotel and civilization. Hooray."

"Hotel?" she choked. "Hotel? Oh, Terry, sometimes I think you're stark raving mad. My salary for a week won't pay our expenses there for a single day."

"So we live high, wide and handsome on credit, like before," he said casually. "We were doing fine until you found out about it and started yelling about hard work and drastic economy. Bad ideas, both of them, I always said. Still do. But I let you have your way and now you don't like that either, so let's go back to trying mine again."

"YOURS?" she whispered in utter despair. "Running up bills we'll never be able to pay. Signing fifty-dollar dinner checks and luck to have tip money in our pockets, if that. Ordering twenty-dollar shirts by the dozen. Charging—Oh, Terry, I honestly do wonder if there isn't something missing in your head."

"One hit and we're in, like that," he said with a careless snap of his fingers.

With that sound, Lorraine felt something crack inside her, sharply, completely and finally, leaving her strangely dizzy and yet somehow icy cold and detached at the same time. Through that dizzy haze, that frozen tumult of emotions surging through her, she looked at Terry. She wasn't angry. She had been pushed beyond anger to utter despair and desolation.

Suddenly she knew she couldn't go on. Six months were enough. Six months were too much. Only a fool would put up with it any longer.

"Maybe you're in but I'm out," she cried and heard her words echo in her ears, as if she were standing outside herself and hearing another person speak. "I'm through, Terry. When I married you, I didn't know I was getting an irresponsible boy. The next time I get married, I want a man. If I can't have that, I'm better off by myself."

Under his bronze, Terry went dead white. "Maybe you are," he agreed tonelessly.

She blinked and all at once, her heart jolted. He didn't mean that. He loved her. He would fight to hold her, fight with that irresistible charm of his, the warm ardor of his kisses, fight by rousing all the tumultuous emotion he knew his very touch could send racing through her veins. But he had to understand she was serious.

"I know I am," Lorraine cried out of the bitterness she had crushed down for so long and which now was bursting out like icy water flooding through a broken dam. "And I'm going. I'm going right now."

She whirled and raced into the bedroom and slammed open the closet door and pulled down a suitcase, letting it drop with a thump. Then she tensed, head turning, waiting for Terry to crash through the door after her, to take her in his arms and kiss this bitter hurt and despair out of her, and promise that he would do anything and everything rather than lose her, that he would change and forget this song writing nonsense and get a job and behave like other responsible married men.

Then she stiffened incredulously. Da da, da Da, Da da Da, went the piano. How could he?

Terry's voice drifted into the room, light and airy and teasing:

The next time I get married—
Now what you gonna do?
The next time I get married
Just love alone won't do.
I'll marry me a man with sense
A man who goes to business
A man who's solid, sane and wise,
Who realizes how time flies.
And he won't be you.

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Lorraine could feel the blood draining from her face. He was making fun of her. He was laughing at the things he had done to her, the things that had half killed her and broken her heart over and over again each day.

Terry couldn't do that if he loved her He was tired of her. Maybe he was even glad to be rid of her. Maybe he had done a lot of things deliberately, trying to goad her into leaving him.

SHE CLOSED her eyes. Oh, how could she face this, loving Terry and yet despising him, knowing she loved him and knowing even better that she must leave him for her own sake and that he wanted her to leave?

Numbly she turned, hardly knowing what she was doing and tumbled things any way into the suitcase and closed it and stumbled to the door and into the living room.

He grinned at her and sang:

The next time I get married—
Now what you gonna do?
I'll marry me a girl who knows—

"Terry," Lorraine choked. "Terry. Stop that. Stop making fun of this. Haven't you any decency or heart at all?"

His hands crashed down on the keys in a harsh discord. He looked at her. He looked at the bag in her hand. Suddenly something changed in his face, changed deep behind his eyes, so that he seemed a stranger all at once, not the husband who had held her so long and often in his arms.

"You're serious," he said flatly, as if he were just realizing it. "You give me a tongue lashing like that and then expect me to crawl, begging you to stay? Lorraine, there are limits to what a man can take. I've taken plenty and tried to be a good guy and kid the gag along. Now I'm through kidding. I think you're right. We'll be happier apart. What are you waiting for? For me to be the complete floormat and carry your bag to the station too?"

Lorraine recoiled as if he had slapped her. She looked at him. How could it end like this? Where had that first golden soaring ecstasy gone? But it had been gone for a long time now and even the almost-happiness which had been its faintly shimmering reflection was lost too.

"Oh, no," she whispered, heartsick. This couldn't be happening to them. "No."

He misunderstood. He marched to the door, opened it, and looked at her stonily.

"Don't forget this was your idea," he said. "I won't come running after you and that's a promise. Don't think you're the only one who's been unhappy. It hasn't been fun and laughs for me, living in a place in the sticks, with a wife who does nothing but nag me about money, and in a slump I can't pull out of for the first time in my life. Only it never occurred to me until just now that we could both just walk away and leave the mess."

Terry was calling their marriage a mess. He wanted her to go. He was relieved, glad to be rid of her. Lorraine stumbled forward and then stopped, looking straight up into his face with darkly dilated, questioning eyes. He looked back at her, not a flicker of warmth in his eyes.

"I'm sure you'll be happy," he said. "Living with a balanced budget instead of a bad debt like me. That's what you really want. Sorry I din't realize it sooner."

The door had closed behind her before she was aware that she was outside and he was inside. Then those last words struck her, struck at her like physical blows.

AFTER ALL she had done for him, the way she had worked and worried and schemed for him, Terry only despised her for it, perhaps despised her

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worse than she did him for letting her do it. She had curbed his recklessness and spendthrift ways and supported him and Terry, far from being grateful, only thought her a miserly fool.

She went dead white and suddenly she was running. Running as if she couldn't get away from that place and Terry fast enough. The trip into Manhattan was a hazy nightmare. Lorraine hardly knew what she was doing until she found herself in the station. Instinctively she went straight to a phone booth and dialed Paul Mattson's number.

"Paul, I've left Terry," she said shakily.

For a moment, silence sang along the line and then Paul boomed, "Good girl. I'm glad you wised up at last. Why don't you take a room at West House? And how about dinner?"

Relief flooded over her. Now everything would be all right. Paul would see that it was. Paul was a rock of reliability. "Sane, sensible and wise."

"In an hour," she said gratefully.

As she hung up the receiver, she could picture Paul's dark square face, the firm set to his jaw, the level look in his hazel eyes. Why, she wondered, had she ever fallen out of love with him and into the mad heartbreak which was Terry. Paul had warned her about Terry before they ever met.

She had thought Terry might be amusing, after Paul's tales of what a lawyer suffered when he had a musician as a client. The guy was so unbusinesslike he wouldn't even keep an appointment at the office but simply invited his attorney to a party at his penthouse and said to bring his secretary-fiancée along as a date.

"This Terry Ransome makes it and spends it," Paul had said resignedly. "You've been dancing to his tunes for years. Right now he's got two hits. *Lullaby Lady* and *Date at the Automat.*"

"Oh," Lorraine had gasped.

"But he hasn't done anything for the last six months. Now he's still living high and he owes everybody in town. If I can't talk sense to him and persuade him to go to work or cut out his crazy spending, Terry's going to find himself with more lawsuits on his hands than he ever thought existed."

Oh, Paul had warned her. But, as he said later, not without bitterness, it never occurred to him she could fall for a guy like Terry, all charm and talent and no substance.

But Lorraine had. She had gone with Paul to the party, thinking only that it might make an amusing evening. One look at Terry at the piano, one glance from those brown eyes, one touch of his hand as he held out his cocktail for her to share, and her heart was lost, blindly and irrevocably. And, lost in the crazy glory of Terry's kisses, she hadn't even remembered Paul's warning until she and Terry came back from that madly luxurious honeymoon in Florida and faced a mountain of lawsuits.

She had done her best, Lorraine told herself now. And so had Paul, with hardly a word about how he felt. He had quieted Terry's creditors by diverting all song royalties to them, and she had cried and screamed and raged until Terry had given up the hotel penthouse and moved out to Jersey with her, where she had thought they could raise their own food and be reasonably self-sufficient. Oh, she had done all any woman could, and more. She had been a fool, with a lazy extravagant man on her hands. And she, Lorraine thought bitterly, had got nothing but contempt for her pains and heartbreak.

At least, she thought harshly, she might have broken her heart but she had saved her life. Though she had to fight to keep herself from sinking into such complete despair that life seemed hardly worth living.

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SOMEHOW she registered at the hotel, changed into a gay print which had been one of the extravagances of the honeymoon, and went down to wait at the quiet, discreet bar-lounge.

Paul walked in, took one look at her face and drew his breath in sharply. "Lorraine!"

She raised eyes which were blue-black pools of despair. "It's all right, Paul," she said through numb lips. "I'll get over it. But it's tough to admit Terry hates me for all I tried to do for him. His last words were a crack at me about pinching pennies."

"No," Paul exclaimed.

Lorraine nodded slowly and then, pushed beyond false pride by the shock she still couldn't seem to take in, confessed, "I guess I was really only threatening to leave him to try to frighten some sense into his head. But he jumped at the chance—did everything but push me out the door."

Paul just shook his dark head and reached out to cover her hand with his. "Lorraine, tough as it is now, this is a break for you. Look at it this way. Terry's a crazy musician who'd drive any reasonable person crazy. Write him off as education."

Write those hours in Terry's arms, the ecstasy of his lips on hers off as education, Lorraine thought, trying to keep a mist from her eyes. Write off utter despair and desolation as education? Maybe she could. She must.

"Now I've kept my mouth strictly shut all this time," Paul said grimly. "But you know I want nothing as much as to go back to where we were before you met Terry. Forget him as an interlude which should never have happened."

She raised her thick fan of lashes and looked at Paul then. She could see the future so plainly, with Paul the kind of husband she had wanted in Terry, with life stretching smooth and serene before them. Somehow, however, with Paul, it seemed completely dull and dusty-dry.

Sighing sharply, she shook her head at herself. She was a fool. Someday she would manage to break this spell which Terry had cast over her and be happy with Paul. That was the sensible solution, the only solution.

"What about the Jersey place?" Paul asked practically.

Lorraine's red mouth twitched with sad, wry humor. "I just walked out, dumping the whole thing on Terry."

"Good," he said emphatically. "Throw the whole thing on Terry for a change. Including coming to see me about a divorce. You concentrate on finding yourself a place to live and having some fun for a while. To start off, is Deldis still your favorite dining place?"

They went to dinner. And then they went dancing. All the time, Lorraine was conscious that she was smiling and talking and nodding like a puppet, while deep inside her, a foggy numbness seemed to wall off everything, so that nothing appeared quite real.

Paul, with his usual miraculous efficiency, found her an apartment. The days went by and became weeks. And still Lorraine hadn't heard from Terry.

Then one evening, waiting for Paul to pick her up for dinner, she idly picked up the newspaper and scanned the gossip columns. Suddenly she stiffened at one item she read.

"What song writer, who has been on the skids, is making a comeback via a catchy tune airing his domestic troubles? And could those troubles have been responsible for the skids?"

Da da, da Da, Da da Da, echoed in Lorraine's brain.

"Oh, no," she gasped aloud.

Impossible! Even Terry wouldn't do anything that outrageous. That had been a purely personal taunt. Terry couldn't sing it to the whole world.

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SHE thrust the paper at Paul the instant he walked into the apartment. He just stared at it for a long moment, his eyes narrowing.

Then he said seriously, "Well, there's one easy way to find out. If Terry's in the chips and circulating again, he'll be hanging out at the Hundred Club, where Pete has his band, and they'll be playing the song."

"I'll change in a hurry," Lorraine said numbly.

The sheer black dress with the full short skirt and scalloped oval neckline which left her white shoulders bare, Lorraine decided. The dress was her newest extravagance, proof that if a girl weren't supporting a worthless husband, she could have pretty clothes and fun and everything she wanted.

Except a happy and beloved heart. Lorraine crushed that thought down instantly but the aching pang remained.

She screwed on jade earrings, scarcely glancing in the mirror. She looked beautiful, but something had happened to her, changed her. Her blackly-blue eyes and full red mouth and shining black hair, all making her skin look more translucently fair than ever, were still there. But something had gone out of that face, until it seemed merely a bad portrait of herself with no life or sparkle.

In spite of everything, she thrilled a little as she and Paul walked into the Hundred Club. She recognized a couple of movie stars, a Broadway playwright and a famous dancing team on a busman's holiday.

Then all at once, she tensed. Paul had been right. Terry was here, over at that table in the corner with a whole crowd, including a gorgeous blonde who looked vaguely familiar. That blonde, Lorraine recalled suddenly, had been at the penthouse the evening she and Terry met. Acting very possessive, exactly as she was acting now.

Terry looked up and, across the crowded room, their glances met. Lorraine's heart jolted and she felt every bit of color draining from her face. Oh, no, she thought frantically. Just the sight of him couldn't affect her like this. It mustn't.

Terry was on his feet, moving straight toward her, and then he was beside her, looking from her to Paul with hard expressionless eyes.

"Looking for somebody around here?" he inquired. "Or is this just happenchance?"

Paul said quietly, "We've been expecting you up at my office, Terry. That's the proper place to discuss business."

"Meaning what?"

"Lorraine wants a divorce."

"Shouldn't Lorraine be the one to tell me about it?" Terry said flatly but a small muscle was twitching in his jaw. "If we must be proper. I suppose you think it's super-proper to bring my wife here. Or do either of you still remember she's my wife?"

"Oh, Terry," Lorraine burst out, "I came here to see you and you know I couldn't come alone."

SOMETHING changed and softened in his eyes. "So you wanted to see me?" he asked softly.

"Yes. That song. Tell me it isn't our song. You couldn't sell that, let the whole world sing about our—our private troubles."

"But I did," he admitted though for once he didn't look quite so unabashedly sure that the world would be delighted with him for dumping all those ashtrays. "I did and I think you should understand it."

"Understand it?" she gasped incredulously. "I can't even believe it. How could you?"

"How couldn't I?" he accused abruptly. "After the way you walked out,

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after the cracks you took at me. How do you think I felt? I took the song right down to my publisher that night and signed the contract."

"With those words you sang to me?" she whispered through stiff lips.

"Those and a lot more," he said, his eyes sparking defiantly. "Come see me and I'll sing them to you. Myself. Personally."

"I never want to see you again," she cried.

Black anger such as she had never seen swept over Terry's face. For a moment, he stood motionless, hands white-knuckled, grasping the table.

Then he said through thin, scarcely moving lips, "I think you'd better come see me. And the sooner the better. To show you what I mean, I'm going to give you a sample right now of what you two are going to get everywhere you go together until we get this settled."

Terry swung on his heel and strode across the room, brushing heedlessly between the close-packed tables, and went straight to the bandstand. Then he jumped up, grasped the microphone and adjusted it and looked straight at Lorraine, a wicked grin on his face. The band started playing.

Oh, no, Lorraine screamed inwardly, oh no. But Terry was singing it, singing it just as he had at the cottage, gayly and tauntingly, right to her. And half the people in the room were turning, discreetly trying to pretend they weren't staring, but looking at her and smirking as they discovered who she was.

The next time I get married—
Now what you gonna do?
I'll marry me a girl who knows
That love is happiness
That it is always spring
When lovers kiss
And that a ring
Encircles bliss
So it can't be you.

Lorraine glanced at Paul but he was looking straight ahead, face a set white mask.

The next time we get married—
Now what we gonna do?
We'll marry us, my girl and I
Another gal, another guy—

She stumbled to her feet, dizzy sickness making everything swim around her.

"I'm getting out of here, Paul," she choked.

SHE ran between those close-crowded tables, not caring that people were staring openly, not until soft laughter suddenly rocked the room irrepressibly, laughter which lashed her fleeing shoulders like a hundred whips. She raced blindly until the night air suddenly struck her face like a dash of cool water. Then Paul's hand caught her arm, steadying her, and helped her into a cab that the doorman had conjured up at the curb.

"Just drive, anywhere," Paul ordered harshly and then turned to Lorraine. He announced grimly, "Terry's got another hit, all right. And you'll be hearing it fifty times a day wherever you go. And Terry knows it. He's gloating over it."

"Did you hear them laugh?" she asked in a strangled voice, knuckles crushing her lips. "And Terry with them. He thinks it's funny, telling the world about us and making a joke of it."

"And a stack of money for himself." Paul paused, scowling with thought, and finally said, his deep voice dragging with reluctance, "He's got us over a barrel, Lorraine. Terry meant that about following us wherever we go and singing his song. And he meant that about you having to go to him. He'll never come to you."

"I never want to see him again," she cried, her voice rising hysterically. "I hate him. I hate him. Oh, how could he?"

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"He could and did and he'll keep right on doing it," Paul said flatly. "We'd better settle this fast. We'll go see him right now. He'll probably be at his hotel, expecting us."

Lorraine swallowed a hard smothering lump in her throat. To see Terry again. To see him with Paul between them, to see him only to discuss all the sordid finalities. How could she face it? But it must be faced.

Paul's arm went around her and he pulled her close to his strong shoulder, "Let me do the talking," he said, his voice reassuring. "I'm not going to use kid gloves. I'll tell him you want a divorce and a proper settlement and I'm handling everything because you're going to marry me. Right?"

"Right," she agreed faintly.

Paul gave the address. Then somehow, nothing was real any more to Lorraine. She felt oddly detached as if she were walking and talking in a nightmare which could not be happening and yet from which she could not escape, which went on and on no matter how she struggled to awake.

The instant a discreet manservant let them into the penthouse, Lorraine thought she would have known Terry lived here even if she had walked in untold. This place was Terry, from the familiar dark bulk of the piano to the casual luxuries scattered everywhere, the great vases of red and yellow roses, the stacks of records piled knee-high in one corner, the silver cocktail service gleaming on a low table in front of an enormous window framing a view of the soaring skyline outside.

THEN the door slammed open and Terry strode in, eyes mocking and yet defiant, and chin tilted at a dangerous angle. For a moment, Lorraine's heart caught. He was so handsome, so right in this setting. Even now, that vibrant charm of his seemed to reach out and catch at her heart. Even now!

"Hi," he said softly and that was all.

Paul faced him squarely. "Terry," he said heavily, "I think you're beneath contempt. The way you held Lorraine up to public ridicule! The sooner she can wash up this whole thing with you, the better off she'll be. You're going to be sued and sued right. You'll be lucky to get off with a mere divorce action, without a suit for heavy damages and a big settlement. And I'd almost guarantee to collect."

"And I'd almost guarantee," Terry said, his voice growing more ominously soft with every word, "I can write any number of songs now that I'm back in the groove. Lorraine provided the lyrics for this last one but maybe you want to write them for the next. Something like 'The Sensible Suitor Who Sues'. I could go to town on a subject like that."

"Terry," Lorraine gasped.

"Stay out of this, baby," he ordered roughly. "Leave it to Paul and me. So you think I'm beneath contempt, do you, Paul? Well, in my book, you're as phoney as a three-dollar bill. You lost Lorraine when I married her and you've interfered ever since. I think you deliberately tried to break us up. Who encouraged the move to Jersey, a place where anyone should have known I couldn't work? Who offered Lorraine her job back? Who sympathized with her? Who made her understand she needn't stick to a useless bum like me when there was a fine, respectable fellow waiting for her all the time? And now my guess is that you plan to marry her the minute the divorce is final."

"I certainly do," Paul admitted calmly.

"Right now, she's still my wife," Terry growled. "And as far as I'm concerned, you don't belong. This is strictly between Lorraine and me. You'd better get out of here."

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Paul hesitated, his fists half clenching. Then he looked at Lorraine. "Do you want me to go?"

She bit her lip, trying to quiet the mingled tumult of emotions surging through her. Paul couldn't leave, she thought agonized, looking at him pleadingly. Couldn't he understand?

Didn't Paul know that Terry in his own setting was as irresistible as he was outrageous in any other? If Paul walked out now, it would be exactly like that first evening, when Paul had walked out in a huff because she had hardly spoken to him from the instant she saw Terry. Terry could sweep all the bitter memories from her mind and weave his own magic spell of enchantment over her again, until she would agree to anything, no matter how disastrous.

She was that weak with Terry, Lorraine thought with angry self-despair, that pitifully weak.

But Paul said abruptly, without waiting for an answer, "With Terry in this mood, I'd better go, Lorraine. Phone me when you leave here and I'll meet you somewhere."

SHE nodded but her eyes went dark with sudden shocked knowledge that slashed at her heart. She didn't love Paul! She never had and never could, and this was exactly why.

Paul wouldn't fight for her. Paul wanted to settle this reasonably and legally. And her unreasonable woman's heart couldn't accept that. If Paul had hit Terry, if he had raged at Terry, if he had refused to leave her alone with Terry, her heart would have thrilled. But his coolness could only arouse a responding coolness in her heart.

"I'll phone you tomorrow, Paul," she promised.

But she knew it would be only to say that she would never see him again, not as a date, not as a boss, not at all. She couldn't love Paul and she couldn't live with Terry! Complete and utter desolation swept over her like a black raging flood.

Terry waited until the door closed behind Paul and then he said grimly, "Good riddance. And I think we both need something to get the taste of him out of our mouths."

Somehow, she hardly knew how, Lorraine found herself sitting in a low yellow chair, looking out at the diamond-bright skyscraper lights sparkling in geometric patterns against the black velvet sky. Terry thrust a glass of bubbling champagne in her hand and lifted his own.

"To a pair of fools," he said, almost sadly, and sipped deeply. Then, without lifting his head, studying the bubbles in his glass as if they were the only important thing in the world, he said, "Darling, you and I both could say a lot of bitter things to each other. We had something very wonderful and we've wrecked it. Let's not end up hating each other completely."

Lorraine's heart caught, hurtingly and treacherously. So like the first evening! So very like, as she had known it would be.

"How can you expect me not to hate you?" she asked, very low.

Still Terry didn't lift his bright head or look at her. "About the song," he said abruptly. "I couldn't believe you were leaving me that evening. I couldn't believe you meant all the things you said, any more than I meant what I said. I waited for you to come back. I waited all the next day."

"I would never have left if you'd lifted a finger to keep me there," she flung at him before she could stop herself.

"I was too—shocked. Disillusioned. Bitter. Angry. All my dreams had suddenly turned and slapped me in the face." Terry said it quite calmly, as if he were

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only repeating something he had said to himself a thousand times. "I can't tell you how hard it hit me. When you didn't come back, I think I went a little crazy. I came into town and got my publisher out of bed and signed a contract for the song right then and there. I didn't care about the money. I wanted to hurt you as you'd hurt me, hurt you by letting you hear that song everywhere you went. I knew it would be a hit." He bent his head to light a cigarette.

"I will hear it everywhere I go," she said thinly. "I'll be hearing it for months. And I'll hate you more every time I hear it."

He lifted his head then and looked straight down into her eyes. "Lorraine, I tried to break the contract and get the song back, after I cooled off the next day. My publisher wouldn't even listen to my offers to buy it back."

"Am I supposed to believe that?" she asked, eyes blazing. "After tonight. After the way you humiliated me, singing it directly to me, so everyone would know it was meant for me?"

"I could even hate myself for that," Terry admitted astoundingly. "But I had to see you and talk to you. And not in Paul's office either. What else could I have said or done that would have got you up here?"

"Nothing," she agreed, knowing he was perfectly right.

"So we've made a mess of it, a mess of everything," Terry said and suddenly turned to the piano and began to pick out a phrase, playing it over and over. "Just listen to that. That's all I can write these days."

Lorraine's breath caught. Somehow just the sound of the familiar touch on the keys did it. The old enchantment was back again, a golden shimmering bubble, holding the two of them within its magic walls.

"What's it saying?"

"OH, something about you take pizza and I'll take pastrami. Take your martini and I'll have champagne. A beer for the lady and a buzz for the gent." Terry's hand crashed down in a shattering discord and his voice deepened bitterly. "A song about two people so different they can't live together and so much in love they can't live apart. A song I can't publish. Yet it's all I can think about and write."

"Us," Lorraine said and suddenly she wanted to cry, for the enchantment that was still there and yet so infinitely lost.

Terry nodded. "Yes. I tried to live your way and it wrecked my work and our marriage too. You got one glimpse of the way I live and it scared you into hysterics." His glance held hers, compellingly and questioningly. "What can two people in a spot like that do?"

Hot color stung Lorraine's cheeks and she said, very fast, not letting herself stop to think, "I know I can never marry Paul. And I know I can't go on this way, loving you, hating you, despising you, worshiping you—all mixed up and miserable."

"How do you think I feel?" he asked harshly. "Oh, Lorraine, why did you ever marry me if you were only going to leave me?"

She jumped up, her glass shattering to the floor. "Why did you let me leave you?"

"Because I couldn't believe you would."

Then all at once, Terry swept her into his arms. He kissed her, madly, rapturously, as he had kissed her that first evening and had not kissed her for so long.

This was it all over again, Lorraine thought, half frightened, her heart pounding wildly. This was the same again, only deeper and stronger and more demanding, until it was sweeping her off her feet, away into that world which held just the

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Tall, Blond, and Taken

By

RENIE STONE

Ronnie discovered that blind dates sometimes open a girl's eyes to love.

RONNIE HATED blind dates. She'd always sworn never to go on another—not while she was still in college, anyway. It was all right for younger kids, and even some of the college girls, but not for *her*. A girl six feet tall couldn't take a chance on a blind date, unless she'd want to risk making a fool of herself.

Not that Ronnie Stevens had anything at all to be ashamed of in her well-proportioned six feet. Her hair was a silken, rich chestnut that curled softly about her shoulders, and her almond-shaped eyes were almost the same color. She was a stunning picture of tall sophistication—but it was hard on a girl of eighteen, no matter how pretty, to tower over a man, no matter how handsome.

But somehow, it was twice as bad if the man was a ghoul—as all of Ronnie's blind dates had ever turned out to be.

"Oh, Ronnie," one or another of her friends would exclaim excitedly, "I have just the man for you. He's six-four and —" But the rest was the catch. That was why she didn't want to accept this

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"I'd like to tell you about my fiancee," Dick said, and Ronnie jumped with surprise.

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blind date for Saturday night. She'd rather sit in and study than date a ghoul, she protested hotly to her demure little blonde roommate, Iris Albert.

"But you know you can't refuse, Ronnie," Iris was saying plaintively, "or your sorority bid will fall flat on its face. The girls arranged the dates for all of us rushees, and you'd have to have a pretty good excuse to get out of it. And after all, Ronnie," she added in a maternal tone, "it won't kill you to suffer through one little old evening . . ."

"If you've suffered through as many evenings as I have with big lanky squares who've absolutely nothing to offer except a couple of extra inches, you wouldn't be so sure about that," Ronnie replied tartly. "But I guess you're right," she added thoughtfully after a moment. "I do want to get into Alpha Ep, so I guess I'll have to toe the mark for a while." She turned suddenly, and wistfully surveyed herself in the mirror. "But I have an idea about—"

"I don't like that wicked little gleam in your eye, Ron. What are you cooking up, anyway?" Iris asked curiously.

Ronnie whirled around and as she spoke, there was a hint of bitterness in her voice. "Janet Cook, the girl who arranged my date, told me that he's very tall—she probably picked out a tall one purposely so that I'd be happy, of course. Well, that's very nice, and I appreciate the thought. But I've had too many sad experiences with tall blind dates. They all seem to lack in personality and brains what they have in height. What's worse, they become very annoying, and I have an awfully hard time getting rid of them afterward. I'll fix it this time so that won't happen."

Ronnie didn't bother much with her clothes or her make-up on Saturday evening, even though most of the girls in the dorm were excitedly modeling their new date dresses.

"I suppose your date will take you to the informal dance over at the frat house, Ronnie," Iris said as she pirouetted before the mirror in her ice-blue moiré, off-the-shoulder dress. "There's really nothing else cooking except that long-haired concert."

"I know," Ronnie said, smirking, as she put on her horn-rimmed glasses that she used only when studying. "Don't expect to see me at the dance, though. It doesn't fit in with my plans." She surveyed herself in the mirror critically, smoothing the tailored folds of her high-buttoned gray chambray dress. Her shining chestnut hair was pulled back neatly into a smooth bun.

"Heavens!" Iris shrieked when she caught sight of her, "You look more like one of our profs than a college freshman being rushed for a sorority! For heavens' sake, Ronnie, what in the world—"

"Thank you, Iris," Ronnie cut in, still smiling in her cat-who-ate-the-canary-way. "That's just what I wanted to know. My plan has worked!"

"You mean you're going to make believe you're a—"

"Bookworm? Yes. Don't you think that's a clever protection against droopy blind dates?"

Ronnie's name, called just then by the girl on phone duty, interrupted the conversation, and both of them just stood still in momentary panic, looking at each other like two scared birds. Iris broke into a smile, then, and said, "Well, this is it. Good luck, baby!"

RONNIE PICKED up her gold wool topper and went slowly toward the door. "Thanks. I'll probably need it. Have fun—for me, too!"

The door closed softly behind her, but she heard Iris call laughingly, "Don't you want to take some books along?"

But all thoughts of books or Iris were forgotten when Ronnie entered the stu-

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dent lounge. For there, leaning casually against the wall and looking over the room as one does in a museum, was a blond, gray-eyed giant with a strong-featured face that screamed buoyant personality.

Oh, no, she groaned, he just couldn't be my date. I couldn't be that lucky!

When the giant noticed Ronnie standing between hesitation and disbelief, he smiled broadly. "Are you Ronnie Stevens by any chance?" His voice was deep and crystal-clear.

"Yes, I—" I *what?* She discovered in sudden panic that her poise had gotten lost somewhere along the way.

"I'm Dick Horvath," he said easily, extending a friendly hand that she could merely stare at. Then, gathering her wits she grasped it in a quick, birdlike gesture, but somehow her own hand felt all warm and tingly when she withdrew it. There was no doubt that this Dick Horvath had an electrical magnetism about him that was distinctly disturbing.

"There's a wonderful concert by the Student Symphony at Rec Hall," he was saying. "Do you like classical music?"

"Oh, yes. I—I'd love to go," she replied, forcing a meager amount of enthusiasm into her voice. But she didn't have to try hard to smile. She only had to look at his friendly face, and her mouth did the rest.

"Uh, there's a dance going on tonight, too," he said, clearing his throat, "but I guess you'd prefer—"

Her heart quickened. Of course she'd rather go dancing. What a fool she'd been!

"Well," he said quickly, "I can see you don't go in for that. Frankly, I'm in the mood for the masters myself. Shall we?" He held her coat. There was no backing out now.

On the way to Rec Hall, which was only a short distance across the campus, they exchanged the small talk customary to new acquaintances. Ronnie noted with pleasure that she had to tilt her head upward to see into his eyes. And they're such beautiful eyes, she thought, so clear—just like his personality. But you never can tell; he can still be a square.

"I think you'll like the program," Dick remarked when they were seated in the concert hall. "Bach, Handel, and Haydn." He smiled confidently, and Ronnie was struck with his courage. How he could date such a washout as she appeared to be and still exude such magnetic personality was beyond her. It made her feel, too, a little like a bad sport.

There was another feeling that seemed to ride through her, but she didn't pay any attention to it, because, of course, it didn't make any sense at all. But it was something all mixed up with excitement and a strange bubbliness. But you know he's probably a big conceited, smug hero who certainly knows all the girls go ga-ga over him, she reminded herself.

AFTER AN overdose of partitas and fugues, Ronnie and Dick went to the lobby to smoke during intermission.

Ronnie was glad to be able to stretch her legs and shake the dust from the old masters out of her system, for, although she loved the melodious classical music, she couldn't appreciate the more deeply technical kind. But Dick was obviously enjoying himself, to Ronnie's surprise, for he'd sat through the whole thing with an intent look of concentration on his face.

"Do you play a musical instrument, Dick?" she asked, trying to set off the conversation in some direction, but secretly hoping it wouldn't dwell on music.

"No, I'm just an appreciative listener. One of my many hobbies, you might say."

See, what did I tell you—conceited! she observed silently. But aloud she said, "I suppose you're on the football team here and belong to a fraternity and—"

"As a matter of fact," he cut in, a pleas-

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ant grin on his face, "I was always crazy about football and baseball, but I never got farther than the back alley when it came to sports. Guess my time at college is too busily taken up with studying. But I do belong to a frat—that is, I might belong to one after rushing is over. I'm a pledge right now for Sigma Delt."

"Oh, really?" Ronnie was surprised, because Dick looked much older than a freshman—more like a senior, actually, and seniors were very rarely rushed for fraternities. "I am too," she added.

"Yes, I know. Janet told me." He smiled a mischievous little grin then as he said, "I guess we're both in about the same boat, Ronnie. You had to accept a blind date because it's part of the rushing routine, and so did I." As he noticed the fan of red whipping through her cheeks, he added quickly, "Not that it's any reflection on anybody, of course. I really didn't mean it the way it sounded, Ronnie, but you see, I don't date ordinarily. I'm engaged."

She wished desperately that her cheeks wouldn't feel so hot. She couldn't stand to be humiliated any further by this egotistical, tactless individual, and the limp "Oh" that escaped her lips seemed to be born of something completely detached from her intentions.

As if he felt the necessity to explain further, he added in a rather embarrassed way, "She's a girl from back home. Boston, by the way. I hope I haven't embarrassed you." His frank gray gaze was so sincere and concerned that, for a moment, her heart melted with gratefulness. "But for that matter," he continued laughingly, "you might be attached, too, for all I know."

"Well, no, not really," she heard herself saying, "but there's no need for you to feel uncomfortable about this thing. It was an obligation for both of us, and no personal feelings whatever are involved." She felt, at that point, that she sounded just like the clothes she was wearing!

BUT THE air seemed to be cleared then, somehow, and Dick suggested skipping out on the last half of the program for a bite to eat at Christopher's, the college hamburger-and-coke joint. "We can talk then," he explained as he helped her on with the gold wool coat. "Y'know, I've been buried so darn deep in my books that I really haven't spared any time for bull sessions!"

"You seem to be unusually serious about your studies," she remarked as they sat in one of the green leather-quilted booths at Christopher's. When she saw his expression of surpries, she added quickly, with a sly smile, "That is, for a fraternity man!"

He grinned then, saying "Well, just because you're being a little hard on me, I guess I ought to explain that I am serious about my studies, even though I'm playing around with this kid stuff to get into a fraternity. But it's very simple—I'm going to college under the G.I. Bill. I just started, at the tender age of twenty-two, because I was only released from the army of occupation in Japan a couple of months ago. So here I am, at Middletown College, and I'm told a good way to make friends and be happy is by belonging to a frat. Though sometimes I wonder," he ended thoughtfully, looking directly into Ronnie's velvet-brown eyes.

"What's this, a philosophical discussion?" a deep voice cut in. Ronnie looked up to see a tall, lean, dark-haired boy smiling chummily at Dick. By his side was Janet Cook, her long, wavy hair gleaming against her cream-colored dress. They were obviously coming from the fraternity dance.

"We didn't see you two at the dance, Dicky dear," Janet cooed sweetly after her glance flicked over Ronnie's costume disapprovingly.

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"No," he replied, smiling broadly. "We went to the concert. How was the dance?"

"Oh, divine!" Janet chanted.

Dick turned to Ronnie. "I don't believe you've met Paul Blake, Ronnie. He's the hatchet man for Sigma Delt. He watches out for the pledges to see if they'll make worthy members. Paul, Ronnie Stevens."

Ronnie smiled a polite acknowledgement to Paul's brief nod, remarking, "I guess you and Janet have a lot in common." She felt herself reddening at the awkward silence that followed. Why did she have to put her foot in her mouth every time she opened it? She must have said the wrong thing, but she couldn't figure out why. She had a feeling that Janet disapproved of everything about her that evening, and suddenly she saw her chance of getting into all the fun and best social events at college through the sorority fly out the window.

"Won't you join us?" Dick invited. He's so friendly, Ronnie thought with pleasure, so warm and companionable.

"Oh, we'd love to—" Janet began but Paul cut in, "But we were just leaving."

Janet frowned, then turned to Ronnie and said lightly, "You haven't forgotten about the hayride this Wednesday, have you?"

Ronnie remembered all too well that Alpha Ep was having a hayride for the pledges and everyone was to bring her own date. That, actually, was the purpose of their having blind dates tonight—so they'd get to know someone to ask.

"N-no, I haven't forgotten," she replied uncertainly, wishing fervently that Janet would leave.

"Why don't you ask Dick?" Janet persisted.

"Oh, I couldn't," Ronnie said quickly, blushing again. "He's—that is, he—"

"A hayride?" he cut in. "Sounds like fun, Ronnie," he said, and as she looked at him saw the tiny wink. "Why don't you ask me?"

"Well, that's settled," Paul said impatiently, taking Janet's arm. "Come on, Jan, the gang will be waiting for us at the house."

As Janet and Paul left, Ronnie looked at Dick accusingly, her brown eyes glinting. "How could you accept a date if you're not obliged to, when you're engaged?"

He looked at her very innocently and in a calm, even voice replied, "But Ronnie, I was obliged. Paul is taking stock of everything we pledges do, and he was standing right there, so how could I refuse? You see, no one knows of my engagement yet. It's sort of secret for a while."

"Oh." It was very feeble. Why should I care if he accepted because he had to? she found herself thinking. It's not that—it's because he's sneaky. Anybody who's secretly engaged . . .

THEY DIDN'T discuss the matter again that evening. On the way home they talked about campus life and the courses they were taking. Rick told Ronnie that he was studying civil engineering because he'd had a fling at it in the Army for a while and found he loved the work and had a great aptitude for it.

"The trouble is," he added, "it takes so darned long. If I were a kid, it wouldn't matter, but at my age—"

Ronnie couldn't help smiling then. "Grandpa," she teased. But suddenly a strange streak of pain twisted at her heart—he was right. He was mature now and had responsibilities; he was engaged to be married.

"Well," he smiled, "there are ways of getting finished a little sooner, too. I have some college credits from part of my Army training and a couple of evening courses that I took before the war."

Ronnie studied him as he spoke. He was so all-around—such an unusually well-balanced, personable guy! He was

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the kind a girl began dreaming about in her early teens. Why was it? Probably because he was so sincere and friendly and nice to be with. I wonder what she's like, Ronnie thought with a strange feeling—almost envy.

"Well, here we are." Dick's pleasant voice broke into her thoughts, and suddenly she saw that they had already reached her dorm.

"Oh!" She smiled brightly. "I didn't realize— Golly, the evening went so fast—" That slipped out before she could control it.

Dick stood still, looking deeply into her velvet-brown eyes as he replied, "Yes, it did. Very fast. I enjoyed it, Ronnie." He squeezed her hand then, for the slightest fraction of a second, so she really couldn't have felt that odd, warm sensation sweeping through her—not from such brief contact. "I'll pick you up around eight on Wednesday. Okay?"

"Oh, yes, the hayride. I'm really sorry—"

"Stop it, Ronnie. Neither of us has to apologize, and as long as we enjoy each other's company, it won't be that bad."

"No," she said feebly, trying to keep the hurt out of her voice. "Eight will be perfect, Dick. Good night, and thanks."

She turned and fled into the dorm, not waiting for his good night.

"You're a fool," Iris was saying the next afternoon as Ronnie poured out the whole story to her. "First of all, what is Janet going to say to the sorority about your behavior last night? All the girls attended the dance, and you went to the concert! And after she knocked herself out getting you a date who was tall enough—and probably the handsomest of all the pledges! But the dumbest thing you did was letting him bulldoze you into taking him to the hayride. Sure, he's engaged, so he doesn't want to get involved with someone who'd become a pest, especially since no one knows of his engagement. The big frat formal is next Saturday, and if any of the girls get asked at all, it will probably be by their hayride dates—and of course, Dick will have his fiancee in for an affair like that. The worst part is that you won't be invited by any of the other fellows, because you know the old fraternity law—no dating a brother's date. So you see, my lass, you're stuck, but good, and it's all your own fault."

"But what should I do, Iris?" Ronnie wailed, downtrodden by the ugly truth of the whole thing. Why had she gotten such bright ideas that threw the monkey-wrench in her whole college social life? And it all would have to be connected with a walking dream! She found her heart lurching at the thought of Dick and his blond good looks, his exuberance and aliveness. Engaged!

BUT SHE forgot all of her regrets Wednesday evening when Dick called for her. This time she didn't bother with her disguise; it wasn't necessary, because all the girls were wearing slacks or dungarees. She slipped on a soft pink sweater over blue wool dungarees, and let her hair curl loosely over her shoulders. Her face took on a pink radiance, even though she wore no make-up except a light touch of lipstick. She didn't wear the horn-rimmed glasses this time and her brown eyes shone with a soft velvet luster.

Dick was sitting in the lounge smoking a pipe and when he looked up to see her entering, his face brightened into that vivacious cordiality that magnetized Ronnie's heartbeats so. He was wearing blue jeans and a loud red, black, and green plaid woolen shirt.

"You look different tonight somehow, Ronnie," he said, studying her thoughtfully as he helped her on with her dark blue blazer.

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That was a good sign, she thought, starting off the evening well, with his taking the trouble to notice a difference in her.

She was right; the evening did go very well. It was a congenial group, about twenty couples, all loaded comfortably onto a huge hay wagon drawn by two horses. It was a brisk September evening and the moon hung like a huge orange pumpkin in the star-studded sky. Rousing college songs filled the air as the horses trotted gayly along and bottles of beer and soda and bags of pretzels were passed around.

Dick and Ronnie were in a corner of the wagon, his arm resting comfortably, but casually, around her shoulder. His nearness sent tingles of excitement through her that loosened her flow of chatter and her laughter. She told him nonsensical little things that had happened to her since she started college: about how she was assigned to a boys' enginering classroom by mistake and had to explain blushingly to the five-foot professor, after entering the class ten minutes late, that there must have been some mistake, with the whole room stifling its chuckles over the six-foot girl leaning over the confused little man. Dick laughed heartily at her humorous little anecdotes, sincerely enjoying the entertaining knack Ronnie had of telling a story. Her face would take on a very serious expression, but as she neared the end of the tale the merest twinkle would set her dark eyes a-sparkle. The spirit of her mood was wholly infectious.

"Y'know," Dick remarked contentedly after lighting his pipe, "I certainly had you figured wrong, Ronnie. Funny how you make first impressions and try to stick to them sometimes. I should have known better about you."

"Oh?" Her heart raced ahead a few beats.

"Oh, don't get me wrong, I thought you were charming, but somehow I felt that you were awfully serious, and a little —stuffy." He was looking at her closely as he spoke, in a hushed voice, as if to see that his words were accepted with understanding.

A slow smile crept across her face as she replied, "Well, I guess I am serious sometimes—usually at the wrong times, though." The twinkle brightened her eyes again.

His face was very close to hers as he whispered, "But this isn't one of those times, is it?" Before she could even begin to interpret his meaning, he folded her tightly into his arms and pressed his lips warmly to her soft, young mouth.

She was so taken aback that, for an instant, she just sat there numbly—but when the realization of what was happening hit her, she resisted his kiss with every ounce of energy left in her. But there was very little left, because somehow Dick had already claimed it with his kiss —one that was almost brutal in its strength but childlike in its tenderness. He released her, then, and she sat still, her eyes closed. His voice was a hoarse whisper. "Well, aren't you going to slap me?"

TINY diamond-like tears glistened on her long, dark lashes as she shook her head in a brief gesture of reply.

He clasped her hand in both of his then and said, "I'm terribly sorry, Ronnie. I didn't think—"

"Forget it, Dick. I understand. After all, what's college without a little fun, and a few kisses here and there—even if you are engaged!" She hadn't meant to say it. She hadn't meant all the bitterness in hiding to creep into those last words; they seemed to be born of their own will.

He looked as if someone had just struck him a blow, but before he could say anything, a silky feminine voice by his side

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greeted, "Why, Dick darling, I didn't even see you tonight." It was Janet Cook, with Paul standing moodily by her side. A strange tenderness crept into her face as she laid a possessive hand on his arm.

"Well, we've been here all the time," Dick answered warmly. Ronnie noticed that he seemed glad to see Janet, and in that moment she had the strangest feeling that there was something between Dick and Janet. Each time Janet spoke to him, she seemed to have some underlying meaning in what at first seemed to be harmless pleasantries.

"We'd better go back to our place, Janet, or someone else will take it," Paul said, not bothering to be pleasant to the others. Ronnie noticed that Janet bit her lip, then forced a smile as she turned to Paul and said, "Oh, yes, I guess you're right. Be seeing you again, kids," she said gayly, looking directly at Dick before she and Paul went back to their place in the wagon.

Dick cleared his throat, a gesture of almost—embarrassment, Ronnie noted with astonishment. Somehow she could never have pictured Dick as embarrassed; he seemed always to be so perfectly poised and at ease. But she realized the reason for such a feeling. Janet's appearance had momentarily erased the mood of her last little speech to Dick, but it returned in its bitter clarity, only to be swept away again by Dick's next words. "Great girl, Janet. She's from Boston too, you know."

"Oh? No, I didn't know." Her voice was casual, controlled. Now they were both acting as though nothing at all had happened.

"I guess she didn't tell you, then, that we knew each other before we came to college?" He was relighting his pipe as he spoke, and she couldn't detect anything from his manner.

"No, she didn't mention how well she knew you."

"Well!" he exclaimed with sudden amusement, his face creasing in the broad grin that Ronnie had learned to love so. "Why, we practically grew up together!"

"She's a very nice girl," Ronnie said then, for no reason at all except that she didn't know what else to say at that point.

"Yes, very nice. She always was a good kid, in spite of her family."

"Her family?" Ronnie's interest was really kindled now.

"Yes, the old codgers! They have loads of money. Boston's first family and all that, and Janet's the only daughter, so they've made it pretty tough for her."

"In what way?" Ronine asked.

"Oh, they pick her friends, and that sort of thing. They think no one who isn't in the *Blue Book* has a right to look at their daughter. Poor kid, she hates the whole darn thing, but there isn't much she can do about it if she's not of age."

"But—but can't she make them understand?" Ronnie protested. "Wouldn't they learn to live differently if Janet brought her friends home with her, or did something like that?"

"Yeah," he replied almost bitterly, "if she brought someone like Paul. He belongs. If she brought someone like you or me, theyd make it so unpleasant for us just by acting like the cold fish they are, that Janet would be too embarrassed to invite us again. And besides," he added, smiling a smile of contempt, "they'd see to it that she wouldn't ask us again anyway."

"YOU SEEM to know a great deal about them," Ronnie ventured. "You must be basing your information on personal experience. "She tried to sound flippant when she said it, but a sick little knot was closing in around her heart. It was all so miserably clear to her now: it was Janet who was Dick's fiancee. He was just a poor college student, not in the same social set as the Cooks. He and Janet had fallen in love and of course,

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the Cooks had disapproved of him. Janet was under twenty-one, so they had to keep their engagement secret. It would have leaked out too easily if they'd been seen together at college, so Janet latched onto Paul and had fixed Dick up with Ronnie so that no one would ever suspect.

"Oh," Dick was saying in answer to her remark, "it's common knowledge in Boston. Anybody else could tell you the same thing."

So he realizes that I'm suspicious, that he talked too much, she thought. She looked into his deep gray eyes that were resting on on her so seriously now, as she replied, "Yes, those things always get around, I suppose." Then, as the wagon turned into the winding road that led back to the campus, she exclaimed in surprise, "Why we're home already!"

The group broke out into *Good Night Ladies* just then and Dick and Ronnie joined in heartily. Their eyes met and locked for an instant, and suddenly they both smiled. It was a fleeting little gesture, but it seemed to be a broom that swept away the cobwebs of any bad feeling or words that had passed between them that evening. A strange silence grew between both of them, in striking contrast to the noisy couples all around.

He held Ronnie's hand lightly as they waited their turn to leave, and soon he was jumping from the wagon to the soft mud path. As Ronnie lifted her foot gingerly to climb off, his strong arm grasped her small waist and lifted her down gently. They were the last ones off, and they stood for a moment in silence looking into each other's eyes. There seemed to be something like pain in his—he, who was usually so gay and warm. Ronnie felt herself flushing at the observation. She didn't want Dick to pity her! But that must be it. He must have seen how she felt, even though she tried desperately to hide it.

She pretended to stifle a yawn, and said, "At this rate, I won't have any energy left for studying. The social life here is a little hectic." She looked at him sidewise as she added lightly, "It must be twice as hard on a man in love!"

His answer was very soft, and somewhat wistful. "Yes—"

They had reached Ronnie's dorm, and she put her hand on the doorknob, then turned toward him. The light of the moon glistened on the side of his face that was turned toward her, and his strong, handsome features seemed to be etching themselves on her heart. A man in love . . .

"Well, good night, Dick," she said breathlessly, and without waiting for his reply turned quickly and opened the door.

"Ronnie, wait! There's something—"

But she didn't hear the rest, because she had already closed the door and her feet were carrying her swiftly toward her room.

SHE didn't expect to hear from him again, because the big formal would be on Saturday night and his fiancee would be with him, and then everyone would know. And she didn't want to see him any more—it wasn't fair to her heart.

But it doesn't matter now, she was thinking wishfully the next day as she returned to her dorm to pick up her books for afternoon classes. That was when she found the note from Dick in her mailbox:

Dear Ronnie: I called you a couple of times this morning, but I guess you were at classes. If you get this note in time, would you please try to meet me in the Round Room at three o'clock this afternoon? Even if you have to cut a class, I'd really like to see you. Please try. *Dick*

Her heart pounded oddly at the sight of his signature. He wanted to see her! But why?

She wasn't able to concentrate on any of her work after that. She could only think of three o'clock. She'd have about

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fifteen minutes between classes, and luckily the Round Room, a campus coke-joint, was in the same building as her next class.

I shouldn't have come, she warned herself as she caught sight of him at a corner table. He probably wants to tell me his troubles. I can't be a pal to him.

"Ronnie!" He jumped up and waved, his face suddenly wreathed in that boyish, exuberant grin.

"I got your note," she said, sliding into the chair across from him, "but I only have a few minutes. I really can't cut my next class."

"Oh, that's all right. I'm glad you could make it."

There was an awkward silence.

"I ordered cokes for us. What would you like to eat?"

"Nothing really, thanks. I'm not hungry." She wanted to tell him she'd been filling up on heartache, and when she looked into those honest, clear gray eyes, she had to shift her gaze quickly, or something unbidden would surely escape her tongue.

"Is there anything wrong?" she said awkwardly.

"No, not really," he replied soberly. "I just thought I'd like to see you. I do have a couple of things on my mind, and I had a yen to talk to you." He stopped then, as the waitress came with the cokes, and he fumbled with his change.

Ronnie clenched her hands in her lap. A thought began to whirl through her mind, If he starts telling me about his fiancee, it'll be the last straw. I won't be able to take it.

"It's about my fiancee," she heard his voice saying dimly through a heavy fog. Ronnie jumped as though a needle had been stuck into her spine, and in a breathless frenzy said, "Oh, my goodness, I just remembered that one of the girls has my book and it has all the answers in and I'm going to be called on to recite. You must excuse me. I completely forgot about it. I was supposed to meet her five minutes ago—"

She didn't know just how she got outside onto the campus, or how she got back into the right classroom. It was one of those kaleidoscopic nightmares that seem afterward as though it had never really happened at all.

That evening she listened for the phone with one ear while she tried to study, but there wasn't a single call for her. She wanted to be glad that Dick didn't call, because she didn't know how she'd explain her rudeness to him. But she couldn't fool herself. She'd hoped against hope that a miracle would happen. But miracles don't happen when love is on a one-way track, she reminded herself.

SHE DIDN'T know how she lived through the next day, having to hear all the excited chatter about the big frat formal Saturday night. She didn't know of anyone in the dorm who wasn't invited. Anyone except herself.

"Please don't mention it to anyone, Iris," she said to her roommate on Friday at lunch.

"Of course I won't, darling," Iris replied sympathetically, patting Ronnie's hand. "Gee, I'm awfully sorry. You just got a bad break, Ronnie. Of all the boys, your date would have to be the only one who's engaged. Everyone thinks he's taking you to the formal, in fact, I heard a couple of the girls wishing they could change places with you. Dick is quite a killer!"

Ronnie smiled bitterly. "That's a laugh! If they only knew!"

"Ronnie," Iris ventured hesitantly, "I don't know why you won't let me do something for you—"

"No, Iris, I told you that's out. Even if you could get me a date who's tall enough—oh, Iris, don't you see? I just couldn't go to that formal and see Dick there with—"

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"I know, but you've got to—"

"Yes, I'll get over it, but give me a little time."

She was glad that Iris was so understanding; she could confide in her completely and know that Iris would honor her confidence. It was lucky that she had a roommate with so much patience, because Ronnie wasn't the kind of girl who could easily hide her feelings. And it was lucky that it was Iris who was there that same evening when the girl on phone duty announced a call for Ronnie. "A man!" she called.

"Oh, Iris!" Ronnie wailed, suddenly feeling helpless. "It must be Dick! What can I say to him? What do you suppose he wants?"

"The only way to find out is by answering the phone," Iris said smilingly. "And, besides," she added, "how do you know someone else hasn't gotten wind of the ravishing Ronnie Stevens and isn't just giving it a try for tomorrow night's formal?"

"Yes—" Ronnie remarked dully as she went for the telephone.

But there was no mistaking Dick's voice.

"Ronnie," she heard him saying unbelievably, "I don't know how to say this, so I'll skip the preliminaries and just pray that you'll understand. I know I haven't the right to ask the least particle of a favor of you—"

"What is it, Dick?" she said breathlessly. It was so good to hear his voice. When you fell for a guy as hard as Ronnie had, you didn't even mind the crumbs; they were always better than a blank nothingness.

"Have you been invited to the formal tomorrow night?"

When she paused for a moment, he said quickly, "Although frankly, I don't know how you could have been since I didn't even give you the chance to get to know anyone else. It was pretty selfish of me."

"No," she found herself saying in a small voice, "I haven't been invited yet."

"This is a rotten thing to do, but my fiancee can't make it tomorrow night as we'd planned, and I thought perhaps—"

"Obligations again?" Ronnie couldn't help saying it, but somehow there was no bitterness in her voice this time.

His voice was very low now. "No, Ronnie, not an obligation on your part. I want you to come only if you'd like to. I'm asking you because I really want to take you, under the circumstances."

Another crumb. Would she be a fool to take this one? People would begin to link their names together. But at least she'd be seen around. She'd save face, too. She'd be with Dick.

"All right, I'll go. It's nice of you to invite me." She knew that he and Janet must have decided it would be wiser not to be seen together yet. But it didn't matter.

When she told Iris about it, she seemed to be talking in a dream. Iris listened silently.

"Well," Ronnie remarked uncomfortably, "why don't you say something? You don't think I should go, do you?"

"I'm not saying anything," Iris replied very seriously. "I just don't want you to be hurt, that's all."

BUT THE next evening when everyone was dressing for the first formal of the year, Ronnie realized that it would have killed her if she'd had to sit by and watch all of this.

Even if I am second choice, she thought vehemently, why take everything so seriously? Wasn't she better off going with a dream like Dick instead of some ghoul like a lot of the girls were stuck with? Others were going just for the sake of going. Well, that was part of her reason, but not the biggest part!

Besides, she thought more cheerfully as she slipped on her gown, this was only the first social affair of the season. In a little

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while all of this would be forgotten, and she'd been in the whirl of what she'd always looked forward to in college. *Forget Dick?*

"Ronnie!" Irish screeched as she swept into the room in a frilly green taffeta gown that made her look like a beautiful bedspread doll. "You're breathtaking!"

Iris was right; Ronnie was breathtaking in a peach tulle gown with a shirred strapless bodice and yards and yards of foamy skirt. Her hair was brushed back into a lustrous bunch of curls resting snugly at the nape of her neck. Her only jewelry was tiny pearl earrings and a single strand of seed pearls. The dress highlighted all of the delicate peach shadings of her lovely oval face, and her brown eyes shone like brushed velvet.

She was smiling warmly at her roommate, a little flush of color creeping into her cheeks at the compliment. "Thank you. You're pretty beautiful yourself tonight."

When Ronnie walked into the lounge, Dick was seated in a big armchair, smoking his pipe and reading a magazine. There were other boys there, waiting for their dates, and several couples were standing around. All heads turned toward Ronnie when she entered the room. She felt self-conscious because of her unusual height, as she always did when people turned to look at her like that. It was a little odd to see a girl so tall—and so beautiful.

DICK LOOKED up, too, just for a second, and then bent his head again to the magazine. But an instant later he jerked his head with a start and jumped to his feet, looking like a handsome, seahardy Viking dressed to perfection in evening clothes.

He stared at her in disbelief as he said, "Ronnie! Is it really you?"

This was the moment she had been looking forward to all evening while she was dressing. The thought that kept racing back and forth through her mind perpetually was, What will he say when he sees me dressed up like this? But he was saying more.

"You look lovely, Ronnie. Like a fairy goddess."

"Thank you," she replied playfully, handing him her tiny ermine-collared, black velvet wrap. "I like you in black and white," she added, frankly appraising him. He smiled, taking her arm then and squeezing it in that friendly manner of his. That champagne-and-star-bubbles feeling surged through her again at his touch.

The feeling didn't wear off when they were dancing in the huge, magnificently decorated ballroom of the Colonial Hotel, where the formal was being held.

Dancing to the soft, sweet music, her head close to his, his arms holding her, was complete fulfillment. She realized then that people must take happiness where they find it. Hers was here, at this moment, and it would end all too soon. But the memory would last forever.

"Hi, Dick." A familiar nasal voice broke into her reverie, and looking up, Ronnie was surprised to see Paul dancing by with a freshman from her dormitory.

Dick smiled when they passed. "Looks like our boy has somebody new in tow tonight."

"I thought he was taking Janet," Ronnie ventured.

"No," Dick replied, smiling mysteriously, "Janet won't be here tonight."

The music stopped just then and the musicians rose to leave for intermission. Hot tears stung the back of Ronnie's eyelids. Why did Janet's name have to come up to spoil the evening, she thought bitterly.

"What's the matter?" Dick asked, looking at her in his concerned way.

"Why, nothing."

"It's a little stuffy in here. Shall we catch a breath of air?" He was guiding

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her toward the large French doors that led to the terraced balcony of the hotel.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, Ronnie's heart began to pound wildly—the whole scene was so intoxicating, as was Dick's nearness. She turned to him, and his eyes were burning into her face. The next instant he took her into his arms and began to kiss her with a deep, fiery urgency that left her no power for anything but complete response. But in the next moment, reality wedged itself between them. Ronnie pulled away fiercely, and her hand flew. His cheek showed white where her fingers left their stinging imprint. She turned and was about to run, but he caught her arm.

"I GUESS I deserved that. An oaf who falls in love and bungles it the way I did deserves much more than that!"

"Love!" she gasped.

"Yes. I didn't want to, but I fell in love with you. Oh, my darling, there's so much to explain—"

"Explain! Yes, I guess there is a lot to explain when you're engaged and you fall in love with somebody else—"

"Ronnie, please listen." His voice was a hoarse entreaty that startled her into silence. "I'm not engaged. I never was." This time she couldn't answer.

"It was all a hoax," he began, his voice low and almost pleading. "Please try to understand. This had nothing to do with you—at the beginning. When this business of blind dates came up, I was dead set against it because I didn't want to get involved with any girl I didn't know. I figured if I'd give her this story about being secretly engaged, everything would work out just fine. I would have a good excuse not to date.

"Well," he continued, "something strange happened to me after our first date. I began thinking of you at the oddest times, recalling perfectly insignificant snatches of our conversations, smiling at the memory of how easy it was to talk to you, remembering the way your nose crinkled the tiniest bit when you laughed. I found myself wanting to see more of you—that's why I suggested that hayride so quickly, but I still had to stay engaged even though I was pretty confused by then about just what to do. A girl never trusts a guy who lies to her. But I really found out what the score was when I kissed you that night, darling, and somehow it made me realize I'd been trying to fight a game that I'd already lost. When you said those bitter things to me, I realized what a cad I'd been, and I wanted to explain. I started to, but you wouldn't even hear me. I didn't blame you—"

"But," she broke in, unable to wait any longer to know, "what about Janet? I thought—"

"Yes, darling, I know what you thought. I only had to look at you when she was around to know! I didn't get it at first, but then I realized that it must've all added up for you. I do know Janet very well. I told you all those things about her and her family and afterward I realized it sounded like I'd been the abused poor suitor. Actually, there is a guy like that—he happens to be my closest buddy from home, Ted Millen. That's why Janet and I are such good friends. Ted is here now for the week-end, by the way, and that's why Janet wasn't at the dance tonight. They're secretly engaged—

"I know it's a lot for you to take all in one dose," he was saying, his voice very close, "but I'd be glad to feed it to you all over again in smaller doses. After all, darling, we have lots of time. Ronnie, you do care—"

"Care?" She looked into his eyes. "Oh, Dick, I never knew how much a person could care, until—"

But she didn't finish, because his mouth came down on hers with a sweet, vibrant tenderness that was fulfillment of both their blundering dreams.

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By SHELBY STEGER

Scandal for Carol

When Carol kissed a stranger, it became a front page story!

AS THE BUS groaned up the last steep grade to Valley Vista, that sleepy little mountain town only two hours' fast drive from Los Angeles, Carol Shannon decided she should be glad for the pictures of her in that morning's *Gazette*. Having deliberately sought scandal, she had got it. She had achieved what she set out to do—to get into a jam so that Cousin Joella would send her home. Home to Stan. Yes, she should be glad she had achieved her purpose.

And she was, really. It was just that she had got a bit more scandal than she had bargained for. The picture of herself as Miss Champagne of 1950, waving a brimming glass and beaming like a female Bacchus, wasn't too terribly bad. But the other, taken just before Burt Brooks rushed her out of the Orchid Club—the dreadful picture in which she had Beverly Terhune by her thin shoulders, shaking her . . .

And the caption. "Wine Queen and Deb in Hair-Pulling at Orchid Club!" That wasn't a nice thing at all.

Oddly enough, Cousin Joella's reaction last night, when she discovered Carol being very thoroughly kissed by a stranger, had not been what Carol had hoped for when she maneuvered that kiss. Cousin Joella had lectured her wrathfully, but instead of sending her home, she had said she would get Carol a job at once, keep an eye on her and hope for the best.

It had been at breakfast this morning, with the *Gazette* and those awful pictures before her, that Joella had said tensely, "Go pack your things, Carol. I wash my hands of you."

She was sorry to have hurt Cousin Joella, Carol reflected. Joella meant to be kind when she insisted on bringing her much younger and orphaned cousin to Los Angeles after high school. Having had the same secretarial job herself for nearly thirty years, Joella could not understand that Carol hated the dull routine of typing and shorthand, loathed every minute of the year spent at Miss Sontag's Business School. She knew she must support herself, Carol had protested futilely; why couldn't she go back to Valley Vista and work in Stan Pollard's father's drugstore, as she had after school?

"You must get over that puppy-love for Stan," Joella had snapped. "His eyes are much too pale a blue and too close

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together for *me* to trust him. Once you get a good job, you'll forget Stan and Valley Vista."

As though she could forget Stan, whom she had adored all through high school! The trouble with Cousin Joella was that she was a born old maid. She hadn't been lucky, like Carol, who had pale, shining, wheat-colored hair, huge silky-lashed eyes like velvety brown pansies, and a slim, lissome figure made to fit the curve of a man's arms.

Well, forget poor, cross Cousin Joella. She'd left Joella behind in Los Angeles, just as she'd left the silly, ugly little scandal she'd cooked up for herself. Forget it all, Carol thought happily. You're home in Valley Vista, where no one's a stranger, everyone likes you, and Stan Pollard's your "steady."

The village taxi driver set Carol's bags on the porch of Mrs. Dollar's rooming house and Carol rang the bell.

"I hope my old room's vacant." She smiled when Mrs. Dollar appeared.

"It is." Mrs. Dollar's long face was sour with distrust. "But I saw this morning's *Gazette*. I don't rent to drinkers, Carol. Fighting and pulling hair —I do declare!"

CAROL flushed. She had forgot that nearly everyone in Valley Vista took the *Gazette*.

"I don't drink and I didn't pull that girl's hair. I shook her," she said meekly. "Please let me have my room, Mrs. Dollar."

"Mmmm. Rooms are hard to rent, with more people leaving town than coming in." Grudgingly Mrs. Dollar held the door open. "But the first time you get to cutting up, out you go, Carol."

Carol unpacked her things, hung them behind the curtained corner which served for a closet. Though the little room was clean, it seemed dingy after Cousin Joella's neat, airy apartment. But this was home, wasn't it? And she loved it.

At the drugstore, she anxiously greeted Stan's dad, "Hi, Mr. Pollard, got a job for me?"

"Think you'd care to work where they don't serve anything stronger than pop?" Mr. Pollard's fat stomach jiggled and he snorted with laughter. "Matter of fact, Louise who had the day shift just quit to get married. You can start right now, if you want."

For answer Carol marched around behind the soda fountain. Everything would be all right, she thought nervously; scandal didn't last forever. Once she and Stan were going steady again, people would forget about all this.

"Lemon syrup?" she asked Mr. Pollard as she checked supplies.

"In the store room, like always."

The store room was dim, stacked high with packing cartons. As Carol stooped to open a case of gallon jugs of syrup, someone came from behind a high wall of cartons.

"Stan!" she cried joyously and walked into his arms.

"I missed you, baby," Stan murmured against her cheek and then put his mouth on hers for a long, lovely moment.

"I missed you." She smiled up into those unusual blue eyes of his. He was so big and blond and handsome, and when he kissed her, it was just as it always had been—her heart danced on tiptoe. "But you didn't write."

He shrugged his big football shoulders. "I'm no good at letters. Are you back to stay?"

"Why, of course!" Didn't he remember how she had promised, when Joella took her away, that she would be back? That they would be older then, old enough for marriage?

"Plenty of time to hear about your big moments in the city, then. Guess I'll walk down to the bus station and pick up the papers." He grinned and winked.

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"See what the late edition has to say about the hair-pulling Wine Queen."

Carol's eyes stung with tears as she watched him saunter away. Stan didn't act like he used to, as if she were something precious and very, very special. It was more as if she were—well, just any girl you could kiss. That hurt.

But surely he would ask for a date tonight. And she would explain that she was so desperate to get home to him that she had decided getting into a scrape was the only way out. That though she had been foolish, she had done nothing wrong. He would understand then.

Business was good at Pollard's Drug that afternoon. Practically everyone in town dropped in to inspect Miss Champagne of 1950.

Old Mrs. Thrasher eyed Carol balefully over her weak limeade. "Back, hmm? Guess you were a handful for poor Joella. Better behave in Valley Vista, young lady. We don't care for fast city ways."

Carol bit her lip and said nothing.

"I'll have a Shannon Float," said big Randy Johnson who ran the hardware store. "Champagne with vanilla ice cream. Whah, whah, whah!"

She'd never known, Carol mused bitterly as she mixed Randy's usual rootbeer float, how narrow-minded a little town could be, how eager to relieve boredom with gossip. But it was home, she belonged here. She had been so homesick that she had behaved foolishly. Why did people persist in thinking the worst of her?

IT HAD occurred to Carol months ago that her only chance to return to Valley Vista was to make Joella anxious to get rid of her. Last night, while Joella was at a business conference in Santa Barbara with her boss, had been Carol's opportunity.

Dressed in a perky black taffeta suit, a little sugarscoop of a bonnet framing the fresh-skinned oval of her face, Carol had sallied forth to seek scandal. Since to be worthwhile, a scandal should involve a man, she took a taxi to the Orchid Club, the swankiest night-club on Sunset Strip. There, she had plotted determinedly, she would—well, pick up a man seemed the only possible way to phrase it.

Probably, when the Orchid's head waiter regretted his inability to serve unescorted ladies, it would have been best if Carol had lost her nerve then. Instead she swiftly scanned the tall young man who had just entered the Orchid Club. His dark head was bare, he wore his clothes with jaunty ease. His even features were tanned, his gray eyes were clear beneath level brows, and his wide mouth had humor lurking in the corners. He looked nice. And quite, quite alone.

"*There* you are!" Carol cried brightly and walked toward him. "Aren't you ashamed to keep me waiting?"

The gray eyes widened an instant and then he grinned.

"Ashamed is too weak a word, my dear. Angelo, our table, please . . ."

"And now, what is all this?" the young man demanded when they had been seated in the dimly lit, lavishly decorated Orchid Room. "You *look* like a nice girl."

Carol turned scarlet. "Oh, I am! It's just that—" She broke off, unwilling to tell this stranger she had chosen him at random to be half-owner of a scandal.

"I get it. You want to be Miss Champagne."

"Miss *who?*"

"You didn't notice the posters out front? Detwiler's, the Imperial Dry Champagne Supreme, is staging a publicity shindig here tonight." He gestured at the crowded room. "Some one of this select mob of would-be movie starlets and left-over debutantes will be crowned Miss Champagne. And you hope it'll be you."

"That's it," Carol fibbed glibly. "I'm going home to Valley Vista soon to be

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married. I thought a glamorous memory would be fun to take back to our quiet little town. Having no escort, I brazenly latched onto you. Do you always night-club alone?"

"Among my many other chores as a reporter for the *Morning Gazette*, I cover the night spots. Burt Brooks is the name."

"I'm Carol Shannon."

"From Valley Vista, which may not be so quiet as you think. There's a road-house outside your town—the Jack o' Lantern—that's running wide open with gambling. My paper—well, no matter." He smiled at her. "Let us dance and be merry until you are crowned Miss Fizz of nineteen fifty."

Burt proved to be an excellent dancer and wittily delightful company. Carol was almost sorry when Detwiler's queen-choosing began. It was nonsense, she reflected; she wouldn't enter into it, except that Burt mentioned Miss Champagne's picture would be in all the papers. Joella would be furious, Carol thought happily—and went to line up with the other girls.

AMAZINGLY, fantastically, Carol was chosen Miss Champagne! It almost went to Beverly Terhune, the town's giddiest deb, but finally it was Carol. There was a confusion of spotlights, the glare of flash-bulbs, applause, music, climaxing in her being photographed perched atop a huge phoney bottle of Detwiler's finest, waving the bubbling glass. It was quite ridiculous and, she had to admit, quite a lot of fun. And Joella would rave!

It was very late when it was over, and Carol accepted Burt Brooks' offer to drive her home. They were almost at the door when it happened.

Beverly Terhune, a red-haired, green-eyed girl who would have been pretty but for the sullen pout her scarlet mouth wore, stopped Carol.

"*I* should have been Miss Champagne, you know. It's quite unfair for some little nobody to be chosen just because Burt Brooks has a drag."

She's been drinking, Carol thought and turned away. "It's late, Burt. We'd best hurry."

Beverly grabbed Carol by an arm, swung her around. "In a hurry? Take this with you, then!" And incredibly her hand flashed out and stung against Carol's cheek.

A sudden red rage flared and shimmered in Carol's brain. Before she knew it, she had Beverly's thin shoulders in her hands and was shaking her, hard. She was conscious of the girl's outraged screech, the brief glare of flash-bulbs, and then Burt scooped her up suddenly, carried her outside and thrust her into his car.

"I'm so ashamed," Carol choked as he pulled away from the curb. "I never did a thing like that in my life."

"Bev Terhune's a spoiled brat who's been drinking too much of Detwiler's product," Burt comforted. "Forget it. She will have by morning."

Carol was still trembling with nerves when she arrived at the door of Joella's apartment. She was anxious to get inside, but first she had her scandal to take care.

"You've been sweet, Burt. I'm ever so grateful." Quite shamelessly she moved very close, sighed, and raised her lips invitingly.

"Something tells me I shouldn't." Burt chuckled and gathered her into his arms. She melted against him and let his lips take hers. I'll tell Stan some day, she told the nudge of conscience which assailed her. And then forgot conscience, forgot Stan, in the dizzying thrill which swept her like wildfire. Scandalous this might be, but oh, it was lovely!

The door opened behind her. "*Carol!*" shrilled Cousin Joella.

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"This isn't where I came in, but it looks like where I get off," Burt said dryly, flipped a hand in gay salute, and departed.

CAROL tossed her magazine aside. It seemed impossible that only last night she had been behaving so outrageously, and now she was back in Mrs. Dollar's prim room. She was glad to be back, away from the city where you could kiss strange men without too much difficulty. Only—where was Stan? She needed the assurance of Stan's love, his arms about her, his mouth on hers, to take away the annoyingly haunting memory of last night's kiss. She had no intention of remembering Burt Brooks' kiss.

There was a rap at her door. "A man to see you," her landlady said coldly, through the door.

Carol's heart gave a little leap—Stan! She unzipped her housecoat, pulled on a fresh gray linen dress, swept lipstick across her mouth, brushed her pale gilt curls to smoothness. She had known Stan would come.

It was Burt Brooks, looking very handsome in a tweed jacket and brown trousers, his dark hair just a little touseled, his white teeth flashing in a smile.

"Your cousin wouldn't tell me where you were, but I remembered Valley Vista," he said. "Any place decent to eat in this town? I'm starved."

"The Country Club dining room is open to the public," Carol said. "It's really the only place."

So Carol entered the Country Club on Burt's arm. She had always dreamed of doing so with Stan. In Valley Vista, it was tantamount to announcing an engagement, when a couple started frequenting the Country Club, where the young married couples danced and dined. Now, with Burt, she saw people lean their heads together to whisper and wonder who Carol's stranger was. Someone from her city past? Well, let them wonder, she thought crossly, let them gossip.

They dined, not too well, and danced to juke-box music—the Country Club imported an orchestra only for big affairs.

"Not much like the Orchid Club, is it?" Burt laughed as they drove away after dinner.

"Safer." Carol smiled ruefully. "No photographers."

"I was sorry about that. I—"

"I'll forget it quicker if we don't discuss it. Where are we going?"

"I thought we would drop in at the Jack o' Lantern," Burt said, heading out the highway. "My paper's opening an anti-gambling campaign. I thought I'd see what I could."

"That's a terrible place," Carol told him. "No nice girl goes there."

"Suits me," Burt said amiably and pulled off the highway to a small parking place where cars could stop to admire the view. "The Jack o' Lantern was mostly an excuse. I came to Valley Vista to talk to you. Carol, are you really marrying someone here?"

IT WAS time she was being honest, Carol decided.

"I've loved Stan ever since we were in high school together, but—well, he didn't come to see me tonight. And everyone is talking about those awful pictures of me in the paper. I wish—"

Suddenly she was crying, her face buried in her shaking hands. She was back home and lonely. It was dreadful to be lonely in your own home town, with the people you had known all your life looking at you with scorn bright and malice in their eyes. She wished—

She didn't know what she wished, exactly, but she knew it was somehow comforting to be in Burt Brooks' arms. He was holding her closely, patting her shoulder with one big hand, dabbing in-

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effectually at her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Don't cry, Carol," he said worriedly. "Don't, honey."

Comforting, too, his mouth on hers—gentle, and then fiercer, until her heart hammered and her mind whirled with a delicious confusion. This should be Stan, she thought wildly; she should be caring that this wasn't Stan. But in some sweetly strange way, she didn't care; she was even glad that it was Burt.

"They say—and I've often wondered who these wise They are—that you don't meet a girl and fall instantly in love with her." There was a thread of laughter in Burt's voice. "But I did. Carol, it's crazy, but I'm in love with you. Do you like me just a little?"

"Kissing you is wonderful," she whispered. "Being in your arms is heavenly. But so much has happened in so short a time. I'm lonely and unhappy—I wouldn't want to mistake comfort for love. I've always thought it was Stan."

"Face this, my darling," he said sternly. "If Stan loved you, nothing would have kept him from being with you tonight."

"I—I think I love you, Burt. Give me time to decide."

"Not too much time." He laughed and held her closer. "I'm selfish; I want to marry you now, make you happy. I want to start to make up, for instance, for not killing that news story, for letting those pictures run. It wasn't so important. I could have—"

"You wrote that story?" Carol sat up straight, stared at him in the dim light from the dashboard. "I didn't know that you—"

He nodded. "Sure. Space-filler. A ten-second sensation that's forgotten the minute the reader turns the page. I wasn't sure I was in love when I filed my copy, that's all."

"Knowing what that so-humorous story about my squabbling with Beverly Terhune would do to my reputation, you ran it anyway," she said slowly. "Take me home, please. Love you? That's a laugh—at my expense."

"You might remember that you started all this, when you picked me up in the Orchid Club," Burt pointed out distantly. "It was you who wanted to enter that stupid contest. You knew you'd get your picture in the paper."

"I didn't want to be Miss Champagne at all." Swiftly Carol sketched in her reasons for the whole thing, and very absurd indeed they sounded now. "So I got what I wanted from you, Burt Brooks—the kiss from a stranger that made Joella send me home."

BURT started the car, drove in silence for some time.

"I've heard a lot of reasons for kisses," he said at last with a thin chuckle. "Yours is a new one. I can't say I'm crazy about it. Here's your rooming house. And good night . . ."

A week went by. Humorous comments were not quite so frequent at the soda fountain, but Carol still seethed inwardly at an occasional reference to hair-pulling or champagne. Her chief worry was the concrete fact that Stan Pollard had shown no more interest in her than to stop now and then for a few minutes chat of this and that, and to tease her.

"Quiet around here after L. A., I guess." He laughed, his eyes intent on her flushed face. "Lots of guys on the loose, lots of hot spots to go to. Plenty of dates—some of them even follow you up here. Mighty popular girl, that Carol Shannon."

"Maybe." She tilted her chin. Let him think I was popular, she thought heavily, let him think other men want me, whether he does or not.

She worried, too, about the flitting whisper she picked up at the soda fountain, aimed at her intentionally, she felt sure. The rumor that Stan was going with a

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girl from the next village, Lily Tucker, the banker's daughter. Was it true? Oh, please not! Stan had to be the one for her—nothing else made sense. That you could meet a man, see him twice, kiss him twice, and have those kisses burned into your memory, your heart—no, that made no sense.

The man you loved must be, if there was any pattern to life, the boy you had grown up with, the boy you knew almost as well as you knew yourself. You didn't fall in love with a stranger.

Or if you did, you'd better be sensible and forget him.

And then Stan asked her for a date!

"Tonight, about eight, Carol? We'll have dinner and a few dances."

She was so blissfully happy, she revelled as she dressed in the taffeta suit she had worn to the Orchid Club—maybe the Country Club set would recognize it as the one she'd worn in that ridiculous picture. Seeing her there with Stan would make everything all right. Stan still did care for her—oh, he had been a little shocked at the publicity, perhaps; any nice man might be. But he knew she was still the same Carol Shannon, and he loved her. She was so unbelievably happy.

"Stan, surely not the Jack o' Lantern!" Carol protested when Stan started out the highway.

"Why not? Don't you feel safe with me?" He hummed under his breath during the five-mile drive. His hand squeezed hers as he helped her out of the car before the long, squat building. "It's the only place around Valley Vista you can have any fun, Carol. So they gamble—so what! You've been to faster spots than this. Besides, it's too late for dinner anyplace else now."

She was hungry, Carol worried, but with Stan of course she'd be safe. Still, she was surprised that he would bring her here.

THERE was no evidence of gambling; the main room was just a big barny place with tables around a dance floor. There was a tinny three-piece orchestra. Her steak was tough, the waiter was poorly trained. The drinks he brought Stan slopped over the sides of the glass and stained the grayish table cloth. It was a dump; even the Country Club, as badly run as it was, was better than this.

But she mustn't be critical. Stan had come back to her; if there was another girl he wouldn't date her at all.

"Dance, honey?"

It seemed like old times, when they used to go to high school dances together, to be circling a floor in Stan's arms. It was—well, it wasn't quite as wonderful as she'd thought it would be, because Stan held her too tightly, the drinks he'd had made him miss a step now and then. Stan didn't used to drink.

There was a vast back room, Carol discovered, with dice tables, slot machines, roulette. She was bored and uneasy as she stood around watching Stan shoot dice and lose, gulping highballs the while.

Back at their table, he called for another drink.

"Maybe some black coffee, Stan?" she suggested worriedly. "The road is steep and winding—if you're to drive . . ."

"Drunk or sober, I can drive." He laughed and reached for her hand. "Besides, who said anything about going home?"

"It's late. Please, Stan." Suddenly this wasn't fun, and she wanted to go home.

He threw a heavy arm about her shoulders. "Don't get high-toned with me, baby. We'll go home when I say so. Nobody'll know, not even Lily Turner. We might even arrange some champagne. Drink a toast to Lily, who's got money, and Carol, who's pretty and broad-minded."

(Please turn to page 128)

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Needlework Patterns 20c Each

538

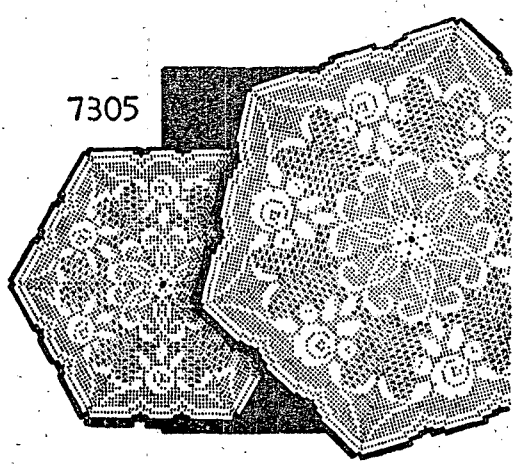
655

How I lay me

538 *Brighten up your linen closet with* these easy to crochet and embroider linens. Single-stitch flowers work up quickly. Transfer 10 motifs 5 x 11 to 5½ x 5½ inches.

655 Easy to embroider panel for your child's nursery. Exciting to look at and easy to memorize. Transfer 15½ x 19½ inches. Complete directions are included in the pattern.

7305 Enhance your furniture with these filet crochet doilies. Start at the center of the doily and work around. Rose doily is most attractive. Concise crochet directions are given.



7305

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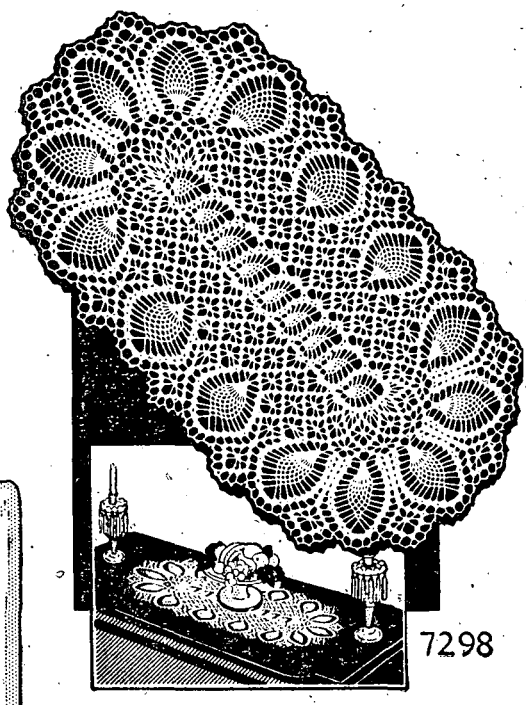
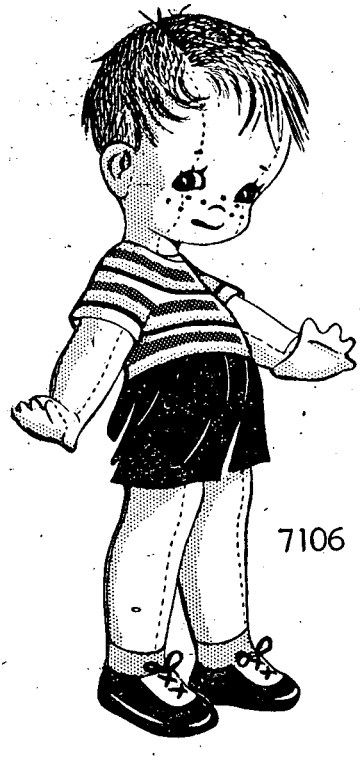
7396 Enhance your linen closet with these pretty maids. Transfer 6 motifs 6½ x 8 to 7½ x 10½ inches. Complete directions.

7396



7298



7106

7298 Brighten your table setting with this scarf. Done in your favorite crochet, spiderweb and pineapple design. Crochet them in various sizes. Small size is 14 x 26 inches in No. 50 cotton. Directions.

7106 Just the thing for your little one. He has freckles and straw yarn for his hair. 15 inch transfer and clothes patterns included.

LOVE SHORT STORIES, 266 September, 1950
Needlecraft Service
P. O. Box 162, Old Chelsea Station
New York 11, New York

I am enclosing TWENTY-FIVE CENTS (in coins) for each pattern. TWENTY CENTS more for the Needlework Catalog.

Numbers .....

Name .....

Street Address .....

City..... State.....

Print plainly PATTERN NUMBERS, NAME, ADDRESS.

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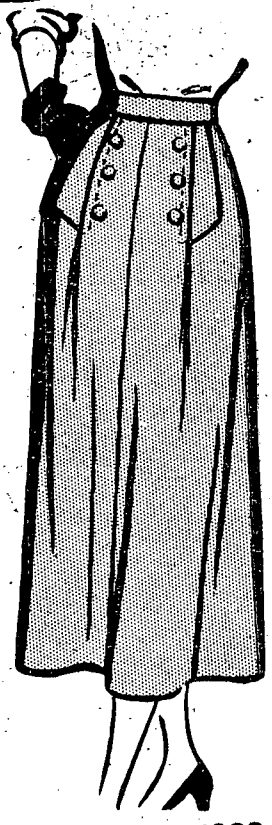
Dress Patterns

4755 This apron offers you beauty plus utility. Plenty of cover-up—big pockets, buttons and ruffles. Small, medium and large. Small size take 1⅞ yards 35-inch material.

4899 Sensational one yard skirt! Smart button-trim, pocket flaps and back closing. Waist sizes 24-30. All sizes take 1 yard of 54-inch material.

4755
SIZES
S., M., L.

Only one yard of 54"



4899
SIZES
24"—30"

9027
SIZES
12—20: 40

9027 Exciting casual with unusual shoulder and hip interest. Smooth fitting because of curved panels. Note the Chinese Mandarin collar. Sizes 12-20 and 40. Size 16, 3½ yards 39-inch fabric.

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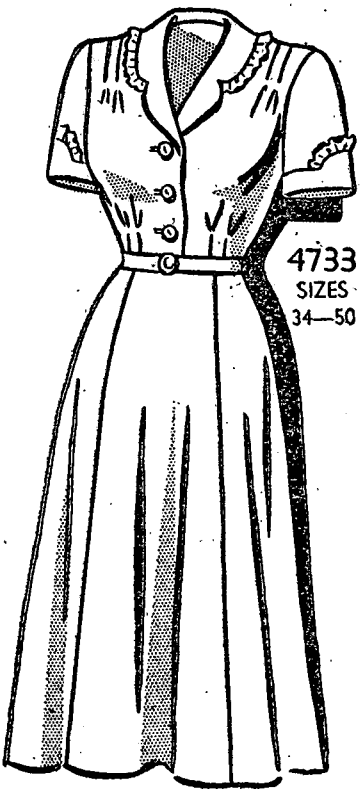
25c Each

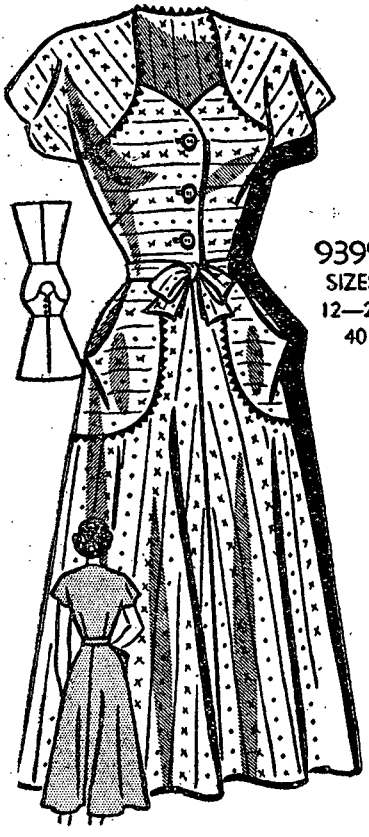
9446 Versatile sunsemble for your little one. She'll love the scallops which trim the hemline, suntop and collar. Sizes 2-10. Size 6 ensemble, 1¾ yards; 1 yard contrast 35-inch fabric.

9446
SIZES
2—10



4733
SIZES
34—50

4733 Look slim and youthful! Note the soft lines, rounded collar and cuffs. Sizes 34-50. Size 36 takes 4⅜ yards; ¾ yard contrasting 35-inch material.



9399
SIZES
12—20
40

9399 Easy to sew fashion with so few pattern parts —no shoulder seams. Has the standaway pockets and deep neckline. Sizes 12-20; 40. Size 16, 4⅛ yards 35-inch fabric.

LOVE SHORT STORIES, 227 September, 1950
Pattern Department
243 W. 17th St.
New York 11, New York

I am enclosing TWENTY-FIVE CENTS (in coins) for each pattern. TWENTY CENTS more for the new Pattern Book.

Numbers .....

Name .....

Street Address .....

City..... State.....

Print plainly SIZES, PATTERN NUMBERS, NAME, ADDRESS.

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White Collar and Tales

The only time Vivian didn't deceive Dane was when she said she loved him.

VIVIAN SPENCER glanced up from the invoices she held in her hand. Her heart began to jig. Coming toward her in the book and stationery department of the Wallis department store was Dane Wallis, the merchandise manager.

If only he hadn't kissed her last night, she might not have realized she loved him. Now, everything was changed. She couldn't go on pretending to be something she was not. She had to tell Dane the truth about herself.

But how would he feel toward her when she told him who she was, and why she was working in the store.

With troubled eyes she watched him approach the counter. Outwardly, his manner was business-like, but his eyes were tender as they traveled over her face to her silky brown hair, then down to the soft pink of her mouth.

"I'd like to check these invoices against the records," he said, laying a heavy book on the counter between them. Then, as they bent over it together, he added, low. "I've been watching you, Vivian. Are you worried about something?"

She said quietly, so the people nearby browsing through the bargain counter of nineteen-cent books, couldn't hear:

"Dane, there's something I must tell you."

"Are you angry about last night?"

"No, Dane, it has nothing to do with that."

He flushed at her quick reply. From the look in his blue eyes, she knew he was remembering their kiss. "It's something I have to tell you about myself."

"What is it? Been falsifying your sales records?"

She knew he wasn't taking her seriously.

"Please, Dane, I'm not joking. You've got to listen."

"Gladly, only this is hardly the place for a confession. Suppose we go to Alcardo's for dinner tonight? From there, we can go on to the Rendezvous and dance. What do you say?"

She nodded, relieved that she didn't have to tell him about herself now.

"Pick you up at eight, then."

Briefly his hand pressed hers on the counter. His touch burned like flame. Picking up his book, he flashed her a smile, then strode to the elevator.

By MILDRED DAHLGREN

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If only she had followed her intuition and refused to take this job! Almost she could hear herself pleading with Red Dolan, the editor of the *Daily Journal.* He was swiveling to and fro in his desk chair, the red bow tie under his chin, the exact shade of his hair.

"Why pick on me?" she had demanded, leaning over his desk. "First-hand accounts of first-hand experiences may be doing wonders for the *Journal's* circulation, but can't you send someone else out this time? I'm still shaky from the effects of my last assignment."

"Which is why I'm sending you out again. When a pilot crashes, he goes up in another plane as soon as possible so he won't lose his nerve. You had a bad experience with Fleur Price last week."

"Bad!" Vivian interrupted. "Red, I'll never forget how that blonde darling of cafe society made for me when she learned I wasn't a kitchen maid, but a reporter out to get a story on why it's so hard to keep household help these days. For once I was grateful for my long legs."

"On this job there won't be any danger of your notes getting mixed up with the weekly menu list." Red laughed. "Seriously, Vivian, there are two reasons why I want you to answer this ad for a buyer in the Wallis department store. First is the series you'll write on the daily life of a store employee. The other is the merchandise manager, Dane Wallis."

"Same name as the store?"

Red nodded.

"His great-grandfather was its founder. His grandfather and his father between them sold it out and lost the family fortune. Dane Wallis is very close mouthed. Won't give out interviews.

"I want you to watch him, Vivian. Talk to him whenever possible. Get me a story on how he acts and feels being a mere employee in the business his great-grandfather founded. Take all the time you want on this job. Maybe it will make you feel better when I tell you that Dane Wallis is tall, dark, and handsome. I hear Fleur Price is trying to drag him to the altar."

"That's great!" Vivian threw up her hands. "And suppose I run into her at the store and she gives me away?"

"Hazards of the trade." Red grinned. "Now get going, and good luck."

She hadn't expected the sudden spark that leaped between her and Dane the first time they met. She hadn't expected to tremble all over each time she caught him stealing glances at her from behind the dollar stationery, over the counter of chocolate creams, or between the transparent stems of the glassware.

THE FIRST week at the store, she discovered they lived in the same direction and took the same train. As if by tacit agreement, they began to wait for one another after work. Vivian, Red Dolan's star reporter, had to remind herself to make notes for the articles she was to write for the *Journal.*

They dined on spaghetti in an Italian restaurant; they went to the movies. Once they danced in a blue and silver night spot. Vivian thought not of Red Dolan and her job, but of Fleur Price.

Did Dane ever see her, Vivian wondered. Did he bring her to places like this and hold her close while they danced. The thought made her unhappy.

Then, last night, while her pulses sang with the emotion stirred in her by the symphony they'd attended—or was it Dane's nearness—he'd kissed her. And she knew she was in love with him. Knew she had to be honest with the man she loved. And Red Dolan had said Dane hated reporters.

At eight-thirty that evening, Vivian and Dane were at Alcardo's, a well known dining room that boasted truthfully that it made up in the food what it lacked in atmosphere.

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Vivian had dressed carefully for the occasion. Her form-fitting cocktail dress of black silk was cut low to reveal her white throat circled by a triple strand of pearls. Her hat was a head hugging bonnet scrolled with satin ribbon.

They were lingering over dessert when Dane leaned across the table toward her. "And now," he said, "the confession."

She'd almost hoped he'd forgotten. Now she had to go through with it.

"I don't know how to begin," she said hesitantly.

"Try the beginning." The laugh lines in the corners of his eyes crinkled in amusement. "Come on, what is it? Shoot your grandmother? A gun moll after store hours? A husband and five children? No? Then it's not important."

His bantering manner gave her an idea. If she treated her assignment to watch him, to write about him, as a joke, perhaps he wouldn't take it too seriously either. She opened her mouth to speak. At that moment he looked past her toward the dining room entrance.

"Unless, of course, you're a reporter," he added.

The vehemence of his tone silenced her. It was exactly what she was going to say. Following his gaze, her heart gave a lurch. Red Dolan, intent on a conversation with a male companion, was passing their table. He did not notice Vivian or Dane.

"That's Red Dolan, editor of the *Journal,*" Dane indicated with a nod of his head. "If there's anything I don't like, its newspapermen." He spat out the words as if they were something disagreeable.

Sparring for time to collect her thoughts, Vivian asked, "What have you got against newspapermen?"

"I'm prejudiced, I guess," he shrugged. "Reporters hounded my father and my grandfather. Flaunted too much of their private life in the papers."

"If your father and grandfather hadn't done things to attract public attention, the newsmen would have left them alone," she retorted.

"You sound like one of the fourth estate yourself." He looked at her quizzically. "I suppose you're right. My father and grandfather weren't angels. But I wish Dolan would leave me alone. He's been after me for pictures and interviews. In fact, it's a wonder he hasn't sent one of his spies to shadow me like he did to Fleur Price."

HER HEART jerked with such violence, she wondered it wasn't visible through her gown.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, Dolan sent one of his reporters to work as a maid for Fleur. Fleur's a regular female Simon Legree where servants are concerned. In a way I'm sorry she discovered the reporter," he added, chuckling. "That spoiled little darling has needed a dressing down for a long time."

Something in his tone as he spoke of Fleur riveted Vivian's attention. Was that tenderness in his voice? Her thoughts became a pinwheel in which the names of Dane Wallis and Fleur Price whirled round and round.

Vivian wanted to tell him about herself because she loved him. That kiss he had given her last night, hadn't it meant something to him, too?

She'd thought it had. Now she wasn't sure. If it was Felur he really cared for, what difference did it make whether or not he knew the truth about her?

"Hey, what happened to the confession?" His warm hand pressed hers.

She laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound.

"It was all a joke, Dane, and not a very good one." She gathered up her gloves and bag. "Shall we go on to the Rendezvous?"

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At the Rendezvous they avoided the mirror-lined bar. Instead they sat in one of the upholstered semi-circular booths along the wall. Vivian was aware of Dane's puzzled glances as she sat silent, toying with her martini.

"Would you care to dance?"

Nodding, she rose and followed him into the adjoining coral and gray dining room where a name band provided music for dancing.

When he put his arm about her, she resisted with effort the impulse to lay her head on his shoulder. It was only a dance, but at least she was in his arms.

"What are you thinking about?" he said low in her ear.

"Fleur Price." The words were out before she thought of what she was saying.

He looked down at her in surprise.

"What about her?"

"Oh, the columnists are always linking your names."

"Which is another reason why I dislike reporters. They'll do anything for copy." For a brief moment, he led her in the rhythm of the dance without speaking. Then he went on, "Fleur isn't like you, Vivian. You're natural, warm, feminine. A man can be at ease with you. Fleur is a spoiled brat, cold and cynical."

"She's also slim, blonde, and beautiful," Vivian added.

His eyes were curious.

"Have you two met?"

She wanted to say, "I'm the reporter who worked as a maid for Fleur," but the words stuck in her throat. After all, Dane hadn't actually denied any romantic interest in Fleur. And so she replied, "I've seen her picture in the paper."

"She's not for me, Vivian," he said, as the music ended. "We're just friends."

AT HIS words, the weight on her heart lifted. It was what she wanted to hear. As they walked back to the booth and sat down, something of what she felt must have shown in her face.

"Is that what's been troubling you?" he asked, smiling at her. "Did you think I was in love with Fleur? No, I want none of her high-society circle. You know, she thinks I'm crazy for working in the store my family founded. She knows I have a very ample trust fund my mother left me."

"Then why do you?" Vivian asked. It was one of the questions Red Dolan wanted answered, but she wasn't thinking of Red Dolan now.

"Because my job in the store reminds me that the men in our family were meant to work for their money—something my father and grandfather forgot. Fortunately, I had a wonderful mother. She taught me that real happiness is threefold: work, love, and a family."

"And are you finding that happiness?" Vivian asked softly.

His eyes traveled over her face like a caress.

"I've found the first part," he said slowly. "As for the second—"

His voice trailed off. His face was so near her own, she could see the texture of his skin. His nearness made her dizzy. She closed her eyes as his lips, warm and tender, pressed against her own.

He loved her! She knew it now. He was telling her so, not with words, but with his kiss.

Her heart seemed to sing and laugh with joy. As he released her, she smiled radiantly, impulsively reaching for his hand.

"Oh, Dane, now it will be easy for me to tell you what I've wanted to say all evening."

At that instant, a cool voice cut in between them.

"Dane! What are you doing here?"

Vivian recognized the voice of Fleur Price.

Looking up, she saw Fleur in a gown

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of silver cloth, a mink stole falling back from her shoulders.

"Is this the date you couldn't break to go out with me?" Fleur asked, slipping into the booth beside Dane. Her gaze flicked over Vivian, who tensed inside.

"This girl has money, but no manners," Dane murmured to Vivian in a confiding tone. Then in his natural voice, he made introductions: "Miss Spencer, Miss Price."

"Spencer?" A puzzled expression crossed Fleur's carefully made-up face. "Have we met before?"

"Perhaps you've seen me in the Wallis store," Vivian said, on her guard. "I work there."

"You work at the store?" Fleur repeated.

"Yes, in books and stationery."

"Really?" Fleur's brow elevated. "What is this?" she asked Dane in an insinuating voice. "Something new in employer-employee relationships?"

There was no mistaking the insult in her words. Glancing at Dane, Vivian saw him redden.

"I don't appreciate your humor," he retorted. "Vivian is a dear friend of mine."

"Vivian!" Fleur started to laugh, then stopped. "Vivian," she repeated, staring intently at her.

PLEASE don't let her recognize me, Vivian prayed. I don't want Dane to find out about me this way. Not from Fleur.

"How long has Miss Spencer been with the store?" Fleur asked Dane, but her eyes were fixed on Vivian.

"Three weeks—a month, what difference does it make?" He was annoyed.

"And where did you work before that, Miss Spencer?" Fleur's voice became cutting as a whip. Without waiting for Vivian's reply, she went on relentlessly.

"I'll tell you where. At the *Daily Journal*. And before that, for me, or should I say, as a spy for Red Dolan?"

Vivian couldn't utter a sound. She saw only Dane's bewildered expression as he looked from her to Fleur.

"What are you talking about?" he asked sharply.

"I'm telling you that this girl is a reporter from the *Journal*. If she's working at the store, it probably means you'll soon be a feature article in Red Dolan's newspaper."

Dane turned to Vivian with disbelieving eyes.

"Vivian, is this true?"

"Yes, Dane. It's true. I wanted to tell you; I tried to tell you—" At the look in his eyes, she broke off. "Please, Dane, try to understand."

"I understand all right." He laughed mirthlessly, rising to his feet. "Our dates together, our talks were merely to secure copy for the paper. Well, Miss Spencer, you can ask Red Dolan for a bonus. You did your job well. I fell for your line completely. Be sure to tell your readers what a perfect sucker I was."

Anger and scorn blazed in his eyes as he looked down at her. Fleur reached up and triumphantly linked her hand in his. It was more than Vivian could bear. With tears stinging her eyes, she fled from the Rendezvous.

Somehow she managed to live through the next two weeks. Her articles on the store ran in the *Journal*. They caused considerable comment. Everyone seemed to know it was Dane Wallis and the Wallis department store she was writing about, although neither was mentioned by name. When the last of the articles appeared, Red Dolan sent for her.

"Guess what?" he asked, waving a letter at her. "The executive board of the Wallis department store is pleased with the honesty of your articles. They'd be happy if we identified the store by name. Now all we need is a statement from Dane

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Wallis. I want you to get an interview."

Vivian's heart began to race. To see Dane again, if only for a moment—but then gloom settled again.

"What if he won't see me?" she asked unhappily.

"What kind of a remark is that from a reporter?" Red reached for his phone. "I'll let him know you're coming. Call in the story to the city desk. We'll use it in the afternoon edition."

It was strange to walk into the store in the midst of the morning bustle. The salesgirls nodded friendly greetings to her. She knew they appreciated the honesty of her articles. And Dane, what did he think of them?

His secretary, Miss Mortensen, who looked like Queen Mary, greeted her with a smile. "Mr. Wallis says you're to go right in."

Drawing a deep breath, Vivian opened the door and found herself face to face with Dane. Somehow, she hadn't expected his presence to strike her like a blow. I love him, she thought, her heart aching, as he waved her into a chair across from him at the desk.

"You know why I'm here, Mr. Wallis," she managed to say. "What is your reaction to the articles my paper ran about the store."

"They were truthful; I can't find any fault with them." Dane's voice was formal, but his eyes were bitter as they met her own. "You may quote me as saying, however, that I don't approve of the method followed by Dolan's reporter to get her information. To me there is nothing more ugly than deceit."

EACH WORD was like a blow. Vivian forgot everything but his accusing eyes.

"I wanted to tell you about myself Dane," she cried. "You must remember that I tried, that last night we were together. Then Fleur recognized me and it was too late. But you must believe me when I say I didn't want to deceive you—especially after I knew I was in love with you."

Ashamed of her outburst, she got to her feet. Dane remained seated, staring at her.

"Thank you for your statement, Mr. Wallis," she said tearfully. "Good-by."

"Wait." He came around the desk to stand before her. "Say that again."

Not daring to look at him, she studied the geometric pattern of his yellow and brown tie.

"I said, 'thank you for the statement.' "

"I mean before that."

Looking up at him, she said softly. "I fell in love with you Dane, didn't you know?"

Again tears blurred her eyes. All at once she was in his arms. His lips were on hers.

"Foolish little darling," he half-laughed, half-whispered, against her hair. "Didn't you know I love you too, have from the moment I laid eyes on you? I thought you were using me, Vivian. I didn't know you cared anything about me."

Suddenly the office door opened. Miss Mortensen looked in long enough to exclaim, embarrassed, "Oh!" before she closed it again.

Smiling, Vivian drew away from the circle of Dane's arms.

"I'll have to call Dolan," she said.

"Will he like your scoop?"

"Scoop?" She looked at Dane, puzzled.

"Yes, that his girl-reporter is going to marry Dane Wallis." He gave her a little shake. "Isn't she?"

"Oh yes," she whispered happily. "Yes."

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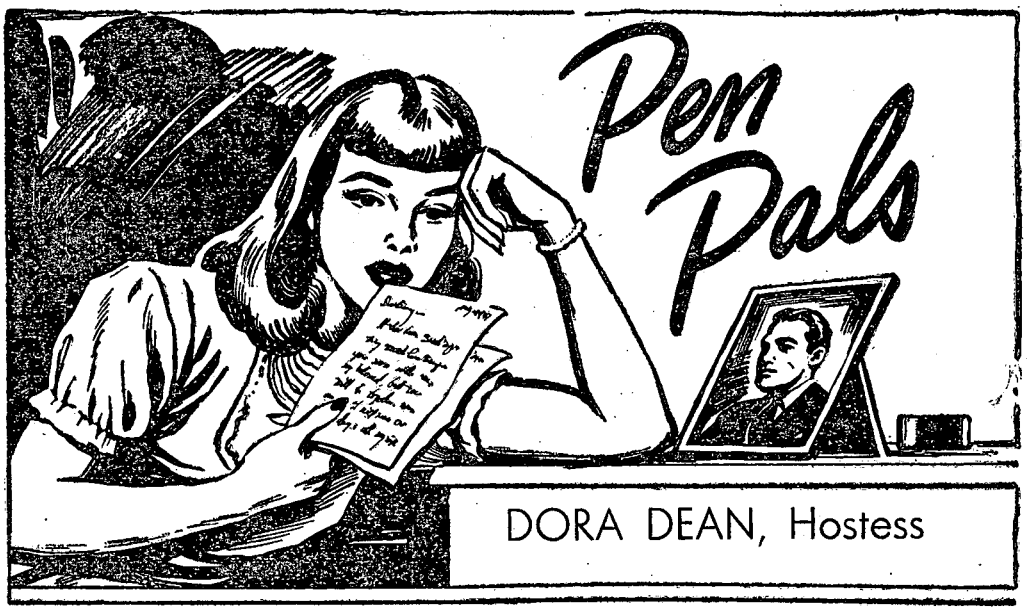

TO JOIN—Write me a letter about yourself, your school or work, your hobbies and pastimes, in fact the sort of letter which will make readers want to write to you. Sign a nickname, but also give me your real name and address plainly written. You will be given a number under which you will find your letter published in Love Short Stories.

TO WRITE TO A PAL—Select someone who interests you, and write your letter, signing your own name and address so the reply will come direct to you. Put this into a STAMPED ENVELOPE, but DO NOT SEAL THIS ENVELOPE. On the corner of this envelope write the number of the Pal you wish it forwarded to. Put this envelope and your letter in another envelope, and address this one to Dora Dean, Love Short Stories, 210 East 43rd St., New York City 17. You may write several Pals if you wish, but be sure to enclose a stamped envelope for each.

Notify Dora Dean at once of any change in address, giving your number, old and new address.

L-4360 ACCOUNTANT

My age is twenty-four, am five feet ten and a half inches tall, have black hair and brown eyes. My hobbies are coins, stamps, sports and sometimes dancing. Am an accountant and have plenty of time to answer all letters.

Steve

L-4361 CALIFORNIA MISS

Here is a nineteen year old girl with blonde hair, blue eyes, five feet four, who would love to hear from girls and guys all over the world. I enjoy everything and love to dance. Won't you write to me?

Sunny

L-4362 LONDON OPERATOR

A very lonely London telephonist would like to hear from some lonely pen pals. I am nineteen with light brown, naturally curly hair and brown eyes, am five feet two inches. Like swimming, tennis, dancing, and acting. Play the piano, anything from swing to Bach and Beethoven.

Bunny
(5c postage)

L-4363 SOUTHERNER

This twenty-five year old fellow is six feet one inch tall, has brown hair and eyes. My favorite pastimes are drawing, dancing, movies, tennis, fishing, hunting. Would like to hear from girls and boys my age, from everywhere.

Greg

L-4364 SOCIABLE

I am a young lady of twenty-seven, with blonde hair, hazel eyes, five feet three and a half inches tall. Like dancing, the movies, shuffleboard, horseback riding and hiking. Would like to hear from some men around my age who are sociable and sincere.

Blondie

L-4365 YOUNG MAN

Movies, good books, swimming and outings are the main interests of this twenty-one year old boy. I would like to hear from other young people who have the same interests that I do. Will be very prompt in answering all letters.

Vernon

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Character Inklings

By SCOTT CARTER

How well do you know yourself? Few things are more fascinating than delving into the secrets of human nature. Handwriting indicates our innermost traits and qualities of character and personality. An analysis of your own pen tracks will reveal many interesting facts about the real you.

HOW SURE are you that the one you love is the one with whom you can be happy?

So very often young people in love consider only what they want out of love and give too little thought to the possibility that the one they want may not be the one they should marry.

In other words, the kind of marriage partner you want, and the kind you need in order to be mutually happy, and the one you actually can get, are horses of three distinctly different colors and should be given serious deliberation before the wedding knot is tied. Would anyone, for example, invest money in a business venture merely on the basis that it might develop into something substantial?

Aside from being in love, after getting acquainted with each other's background, there is still another important question —that of personality differences.

It's regrettable but true that the love of courtship days is not always a straight ticket to lasting happiness; perhaps because during courtship it is almost impossible *not* to put your best foot forward and show only the flattering side of your nature.

Prompted by this same inclination, when in love we are also too easily persuaded to overlook differences in personality make-up which, when not seen in the rosy light of romance, common sense would point out as serious enough to cause mischief in marriage.

Since first impressions are not always dependable or accurate, enduring marriages must be built upon dependable qualities. Sympathy, unselfishness, loyalty, thoughtfulness, compatibility of thought, ideas and likes and dislikes are only a few of the elements that are just as important as love.

Some young people instinctively understand that more than love is needed for a happy marriage. But others, unfortunately, don't stop to think about it, although they owe to themselves and to each other to be at least reasonably sure that they are choosing wisely.

Are you in doubt as to whether or not you have found the right partner? If not, an analysis of his handwriting, and your own, will be as invaluable to you as it has been to other readers. Suppose, like Betty C., you are dating two men and can't make up your mind which one is better suited to you. How would you make this important decision?

Let's take Betty's case. She writes there are two very attentive young fellows parking on her front steps nearly every other night. That is, they park

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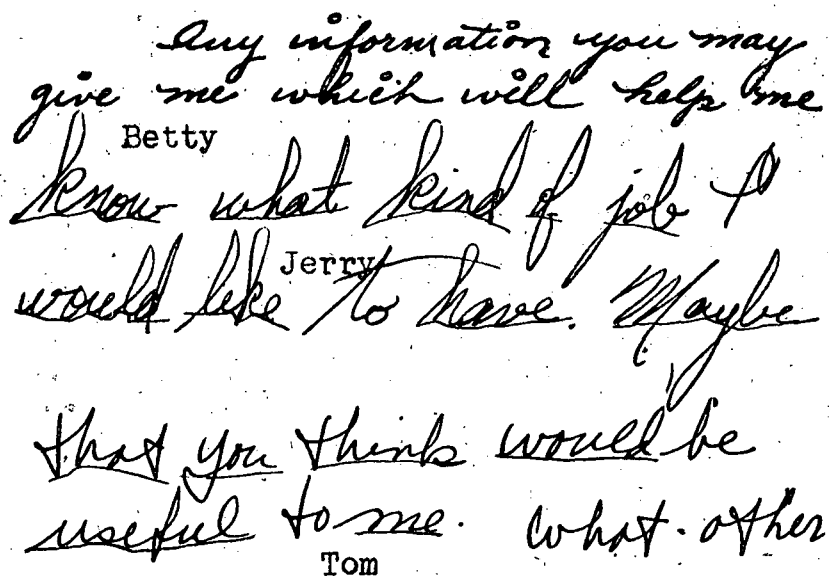

there on alternate evenings as the boys know each other and hope that the best man will win.

The boys are eligible, and Betty thinks that she is attracted to and fond of both and could as easily fall in love with one as with the other.

Of course the actual choice of a husband is up to Betty. But once she has a clearer picture of the personality of each of these young men it should be easier for her to make that choice.

Betty's own handwriting indicates a balanced, even-tempered nature. She is neither too demanding nor too easy going, and though somewhat reserved and sensitive, she nevertheless has a pleasant time in her association with others. She is also sympathetic, soft-hearted and generous, and mentally alert enough not to be taken in by high-pressure methods. This quality in her personality make-up is probably most responsible for the caution that prompts her to consider the question of a marriage partner realistically.

Self-assurance is, no doubt, one of the most helpful characteristics anyone can have in competing for mates. The person who is emotionally less dependable than his rival will, quite logically, build up less confidence in his mate than if he were more steady in his reactions.

You may know nothing about the many traits handwriting shows, but if you compare the slant, letter formations and speed with which each sample was written, you can easily see for yourself that, of the two, Tom is the steadier individual.

If there is a happy balance in your nature between emotion and common sense, and you don't rush impulsively into things but give at least some thought to what you are doing, it will show up not only in the even slant of your writing, but also in the basic line.

The basic line of Jerry's handwriting is more wavy than in Tom's, and this points to the fact that Jerry is moodier and more readily upset over trivial things than Tom. The high loops of letters like k, h, t, l and d in Jerry's handwriting, as compared with the loops in Tom's sample, show that Jerry is likely to do more romancing and daydreaming than Tom; Tom usually is in favor of having his feet on as solid a ground as possible at any and all times.

While Jerry is more demonstrative,

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more talkative and more ready to get things under way, Tom—though no slouch when it comes to making headway—is more cautious and prefers to take his time. The slant in both samples, size of writing and medium, steady pen pressure indicate natures that are warm hearted and responsive. Of the two, Tom has the more even-tempered disposition.

Betty writes that both boys are fairly good looking, so there is little doubt that physical attraction is another distracting factor. However, hard as it often is to be logical and matter of fact when love appears on the scene, nothing is lost if there's a check up on personality, and the traits and qualities that are so necessary in happy marital relationship.

We often hear people say that variety is the spice of life, and that marriage gets lots of people into a rut of boredom. A youngster in school told to write a composition on history of marriage had this notion: "Greeks were the first race to have one wife for every husband, and that is why marriage is called monotony!" Actually, the trouble is never with marriage itself, but with people. If so many husbands and wives who find marriage growing stale tried harder to avoid getting into a rut of monotony, holding on to the "spice" in life would prolong their interest in each other indefinitely.

If you're wondering at this point what all this has to do with handwriting, the answer is that handwriting analysis can help you synchronize your personality with that of the one you love.

Readers who are married often send in samples of handwriting with the specific complaint: "We love each other and want to be happy, but can't understand why we don't get along better."

Nine times out of ten, as their handwriting shows, there is too much difference in personality make-up. The fact that they love each other does not make the situation easier, although not as hopeless as it would be if they didn't love each other. We all realize that where true love exists, adjustment is not impossible.

One young wife writes: "I have been married three years, and only the first year was happy. When I first met my husband I could see we didn't have too much in common, because he was jealous and we quarreled about little things, but of course we made up.

"Now I know that when a girl thinks she can be happy with a man who doesn't like the things she does, and they have different ideas, the going's going to be rough. But you know how most young people are, they refuse to listen to the advice of others.

"We have a baby girl, and love her dearly. But for a year now we haven't been happy. I'm a good housekeeper and cook, and I'm not extravagant. I'm not beautiful, just average in looks and make a good appearance. The baby's sweet and good natured, but Jack often acts as if he's sorry we have a baby, and when he's angry, he often makes it fairly clear that he's sorry he ever married.

"I can get a neighbor in to baby sit, but Jack never wants to take me out, not even to the movies. He gets angry over little things, and then I'm hurt and upset and I get angry. He finds fault with me and my folks, though they've always been nice to him. It seems as if we just can't understand each other. I'd love to go out dancing, if only sometimes, and we used to go before we were married though he was never too crazy about it. Once in a while he goes bowling.

"He has a good job, and we try to save a little, so it isn't a question of money worries. In some ways, Jack is still good to me, but I get very discouraged. Can you tell from our handwriting if it's my fault that we're not happy?"

When dealing with human nature it is never easy to say whose fault it is when

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. in 3 years. I'm afraid he's chan,
and that we can never take'
Wife
n't worry about me. just take it
ey + have a good time when you
. money + everything will turn
Husband

two people don't get along. But handwriting provides much reliable information that can be used to advantage by anyone.

Jack's handwriting shows a moody, impressionable nature and that, to some extent, he is on the touchy side. When not feeling cheerful, almost any little thing can ruffle his feathers even though he is not actually a bad-tempered individual. Note the variety of t crossings and lower loops—t, h, k, g, y.

There is some tension shown in the letter formations, as if the pen was not used with an easy, comfortable swing such as is apparent in his wife's writing. Because he is not as self-assured as he might be, and whether or not he consciously realizes this, his masculine ego is resentful. Very likely this feeling expresses itself in being cross with his wife and irritable about small things.

Fundamentally, he is not a bad-tempered individual. He is sympathetic, mentally alert, responsive when others pay him attention, but is not particularly anxious to look around for other worlds to conquer. He prefers to do the best he can in his own particular niche in life.

Much more emotional balance is shown in the wife's handwriting. Note the even basic line of writing, the roundness of letter formations, uniform size, moderate loops and clear pen pressure. She does not easily let her emotions run away with her better judgment when hurt, nor is she as hasty in her actions as her husband is in his. Probably that is why their marriage is still a going concern.

Both are of an affectionate nature, and need warm responsiveness, sympathy, and approval in order to be happy. Fortunately, the differences in personality make-up, such as they are, need not continue to make them unhappy, provided each tries hard to make the other happy.

The husband is a person who must be encouraged and approved of to give him a feeling of confidence. Showing him appreciation and flattering him would tend to make him more agreeable and less dissatisfied. Eventually, his jealous streak might readily become a thing of the past. The desire for mutual enjoyment and recreation should also be built up.

One way of making someone else happy is to be persistent about seeing their best points. For a man who is unsure of himself, self-conscious, often irritable and temperamental because of these traits, home is just about the best place where he can assure himself that he's able to stand up to the world.

This doesn't mean that a wife has to be a jellyfish and agree with him at all times in order to keep him in good humor. But she can get results by indirection and keep their relationship running smoothly.

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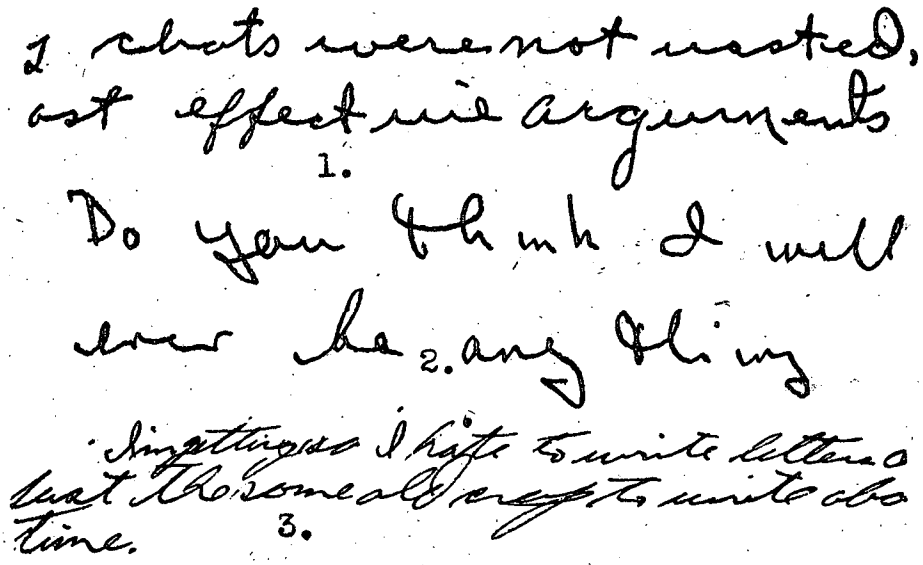
1. chats were not wasted,
ost effect wid arguments
1.
Do you think I will
ever be 2. any thing
Sing things I hate to write letters
1. 3.

Here are some more interesting personality highlights indicated in handwriting. Those who are changeable, easy going at one time, hard to please at another, and who in themselves are restless and often quite dissatisfied without knowing exactly what it is that they want, reflect this same indecision in their pen strokes. Note samples 1, 2 and 3.

All three show an uneven base line. Samples 1 and 2 consist of letters that slant in different directions, and although this is one of the signs of impulsiveness, not too good emotional control and changeability, it also indicates mental alertness.

Sample 3 is written with a forward slant, but the qualities of restlessness and impulsiveness are just as clear here as in the other two samples. Observe the wavy base line, difference in size of letters and in spacing between letters and words, and in the height and length of loops of letters above and below the line of writing—t, l, h, g, p.

It is difficult for anyone whose handwriting indicates the above traits to do much, if any, organized thinking, due to the confusion of emotions, impulses and thinking. And people who write this way often judge everything mostly from a personal angle. The biggest favor they can render themselves is to cultivate the habit of concentrating on and performing one thing at a time.

With few exceptions, men and women who expect to find happiness in marriage should be well acquainted not only with one another's likes and dislikes but also traits and characteristics. If you are in love with a man and his handwriting differs a good deal from your own in size, slant and general style, you will lose nothing by checking more closely on his personality make-up.

The fact that you both enjoy dancing, movies, or listening to certain type of music together, or enjoy certain sports more than others is no guarantee that your marriage will be a success unless you know and understand each other's weaker traits as well as the admirable high spots in your nature.

BOB HOPE, our gay, engaging, versatile and accomplished hero in the world of sunshine and laughter, needs no introduction.

If your boy friend's handwriting closely

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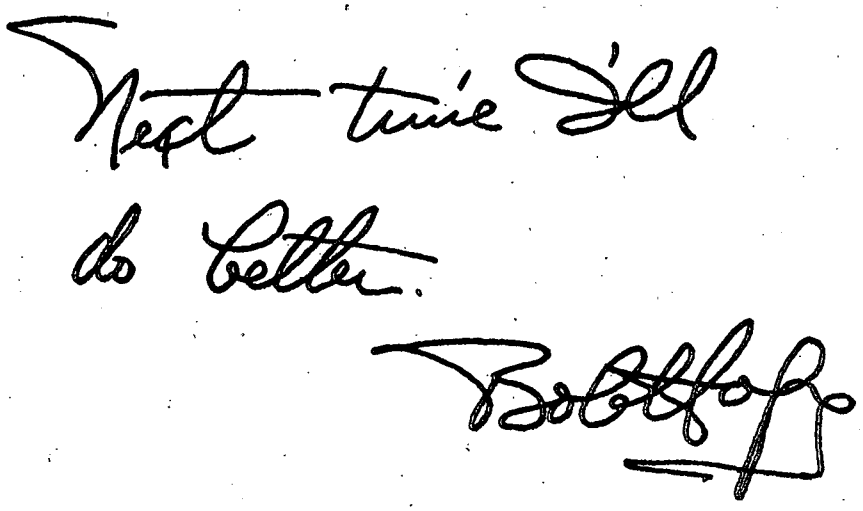

resembles Bob's large, flowing writing (Bob's writing has been reduced about one half here) with self-assured capitals, long t crossings, moderate, steady pen pressure, then he is inclined to be restless and enjoys being on the go.

You couldn't, however, accuse him of being too changeable because he knows what he wants, in what direction he is heading, has a clear, determined viewpoint of his own and is generally a strong-minded individual.

Handwriting of this type always indicates a vast amount of physical and mental energy, active imagination, and enthusiasm and interest in anything and everything that touches the writer and his life, his friends, and practically all that is going on around him.

Though not conceited, he likes to be noticed and appreciated. Doubtless there are some who may even consider him something of a show-off. But anyone who writes large is capable of having his finger in more than one pie and should not try to cramp his talents.

There is much good nature, sympathy, friendliness, affection and generosity indicated in writing like Bob's. If your boy friend writes this way, then he is usually at his best when not too strictly tied down to routine, and he positively shines when given full opportunity to use his wits and talents.

HAVE YOUR HANDWRITING ANALYZED

Send a sample of your handwriting with this coupon, and ten cents (15c in Canada), and a stamped, self-addressed return envelope to—
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No Glamour Required

By BETTY WEBB LUCAS

This small town girl was more dangerous than the most glamorous of big city sirens.

WHEN the train pulled into New York's Pennsylvania Station, Ellen Severt was the first passenger to step off. In one hand she carried an overnight case, with the other she clutched a shoe box containing the remains of her lunch. Ellen's honey-blonde hair was swept back severely from her face and rolled into a knot on the back of her neck. She wore little make-up and there was a spattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. In her tailored blue suit and nondescript little hat, she looked like a shy, small town girl having her first visit to the big city and feeling a little dazed by it all.

Actually, Ellen was dazed, though for a different reason. It seemed incredible now, but less than a week ago she had been seated in her apartment, wearing the latest thing in slacks and chic gold sandals, and saying:

"Of course I want to help you, Mother Bartley, but making noises like a serpent in Tony's Garden of Eden is a trifle out of my line. And just because you think he's got himself into the clutches of a she-wolf—"

"I don't just think it, I know it." The gray-haired woman seated opposite her dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. "I've never interfered in my son's affairs before, Ellen. I've always had the greatest respect for Tony's good judgement, but now—now that creature is bent on turning his life upside down, and Tony is allowing her to do it."

"Maybe the guy's in love with her. He is old enough, you know."

"Old enough and charming enough and far too good-looking for his own good." The older woman sighed. "I'm not saying those things because I'm partial to my own son, either. Of course, Ellen, I expected that eventually he would fall in love and marry, but I always hoped that when he did get married, it would be to you."

Strangely enough, Ellen felt a little pang of regret at those words. Once upon a time, she had hoped that same thing. She

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and Tony Bartley had been next-door neighbors all the way through school. They had bickered and fought, then kissed and made up half a hundred times. He had treated her exactly as he would a young sister. He had pulled her taffy-colored braids and poked fun at her dental braces and teased her unmercifully about her freckles. He had also, she recalled wistfully, helped her with school geometry, bought her first orchid and kissed her gently the night he left Stanton City to go overseas for occupation duty in Germany.

That had been four years ago, when Ellen had just turned eighteen, and she'd never seen Tony since, but through Mrs. Bartley she had learned a lot about him. Back in the States again, he had taken an apartment in Manhattan and got a job with one of the newspapers. He was always sending his mother whimsical gifts—a lei of orchids from Hawaii, a grinning Cupie doll from Coney Island, a giant swordfish, stuffed and mounted—a souvenir from a Florida holiday.

Beaming with pride, Mrs. Bartley would bring her gifts to Ellen to show them off. But then, all at once, the gifts stopped coming, and Tony's letters that had always been so gay and high-humored took on a more serious note. And his letters became less frequent.

"He's in love," Mrs. Bartley explained one day, breathless with excitement. "He insists that I come East to meet the girl. She's from New York City—a society girl, I guess, named Cynthia Ingram. He says she's the most beautiful girl in the world."

"Men always think that about the women they love," Ellen answered, but inwardly she was a little curious, herself. Girls had always fluttered over Tony's dark, rugged good looks, but, she realized, the girl who put an option on his heart would have to be someone pretty special, indeed.

WHEN Tony's mother returned from her visit to Manhattan, Ellen could hardly wait for a report. The moment she saw the woman's wistful eyes and trembling lips, she spotted trouble.

"Tony's fiancée is an iceberg," Mrs. Bartley declared. "Lovely to look at but freezing to touch, and if you attempt to cross her—look out, it's dangerous. She doesn't approve of me and she doesn't approve of Tony."

"Doesn't approve of him! But she wants to marry him, doesn't she?"

"She wants to change him first," Mrs. Bartley answered. "His friends, his habits, his mode of living. She even wants to change his job."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Bartley nodded her white head vigorously. "It seems she doesn't like reporters—thinks they're an untidy, irreponsible lot. I tried to explain to her that Tony's father was the best newspaper publisher Stanton City ever had, and that I often suspected Tony was born with printers' ink in his veins instead of blood—"

"And what did she say?"

"She smiled sweetly—and frozenly—and began talking about her father's business, and what a brilliant future lies ahead of Tony once he begins working for her father. His business is manufacturing stoves." Mrs. Bartley muttered the word vaguely, as though she wasn't accustomed to cooking on one three times each day.

"Tony is about to make a dreadful mistake," she continued, after a pause. "I've thought things over very carefully, Ellen, and I've decided only one person can make him see his mistake. That person is you."

"Me? Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Bartley insisted. "You're clever and talented, Ellen. I'm sure there must be something you can do. Perhaps if you see Tony again and he realizes how pretty you've become—"

"You mean I'm supposed to make like a

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glamour witch and Tony will cast off his new love and clasp me to his manly chest?" Ellen giggled. "Sorry, dear, but those are strictly movie gags, not real-life dramas. Except for the fact that I'm no longer wearing braces and my freckles have faded nicely, I'm still the same girl Tony left behind him when he set out to seek his fortune. In other words, Mother Bartley, I'm just not the siren type."

Yes, that's what Ellen had declared less than a week ago. Right now she did look like anything but a siren, yet here she was in New York, making her way through the crowded station toward a man who was tall and broadshouldered and, undeniably, the handsomest man she had ever seen—Tony Bartley.

She would have known him anywhere, Ellen thought in the brief moments before she reached him. The same dark, curling hair, the same merry blue eyes and rugged chin, the same heartwarming chuckle that set her pulses pounding.

"Oh, Tony, how nice of you to meet me!" She stood on tiptoe to press the most fleeting of kisses on his cheek. "I do hope I haven't put you to too much trouble, but I've always wanted to see Manhattan and I don't know another soul in New York. Your mother said she was sure you'd be tickled to death to show me the town."

"Trust Mother," Tony muttered, under his breath.

Ellen feigned innocence. "What did you say?"

He forced a grin. "I said—wise mother," he fibbed. Then, studying her closely, he continued, "How long has it been—three years? Four years? Mother told me, when she was here, that you had changed a lot, but you look just the same to me. You—you always were pretty," he added gallantly.

Ellen stifled a giggle, recalling what an effort it had taken to get herself up in this prim fashion. "Tony's fiancée is sure to be on her guard against any possible competition from his hometown," she had explained to Mrs. Bartley when she finally agreed to this trip. "If I'm going to persuade the kitty to show her claws, I must first disarm her completely. What could be more disarming than a dull girl with nothing on her mind more exciting than a tour of Manhattan's scenic wonders?"

"Your mother told me you're to be married soon," she continued brightly. "I'm looking forward to meeting your fiancée, Tony." She exclaimed happily, "Why I might even stay for your wedding!"

RIDING downtown in a taxi, Ellen could feel Tony studying her in puzzled fashion, and it was all she could do to keep from laughing aloud. Once, he said, "You know, I had a funny notion that Mother didn't like Cynthia very well and that she was sending you here as a sort of ambassador of ill will, but apparently I was wrong." He lapsed into silence, but Ellen thought she knew what he was thinking. He had expected her to show up looking like a movie menace, and instead he probably thought she looked like what every young girl hopes she won't grow up to be.

When they'd reached her hotel, Tony walked with her to the desk and waited as she got her key. Then, as though on an impulse, he said, "I'll tell you what, Ellen—we're all going to do the town tonight."

"All—"

"You and Cynthia and I."

"If you're sure that she won't mind spending time with one of your old friends from your home town—"

"Of course she won't mind," Tony responded almost too quickly. "As a matter of fact, she's looked forward to meeting you ever since I received the wire saying you were coming here."

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As she showered and dressed for her first evening out, Ellen smiled to herself. Undoubtedly Tony must have been relieved when he discovered she was not a glamour girl. Perhaps Cynthia was the jealous type, who would accuse him of deceiving her when he described Ellen as she had looked the last time he saw her. In that case, it was understandable that he'd be anxious to dispel Cynthia's doubts.

In the privacy of her hotel suite, Ellen donned a frankly sophisticated negligee of black lace. Her honey-colored hair, released from its pins, fell sleek and shining to her shoulders. With a little make-up added, she would have looked what she really was—a beautiful, sophisticated young woman. There had been a lot of changes in the past four years, after all, she mused. Ellen had built up a reputation for herself as an artist specializing in children's portraits. She had a smart studio, a host of friends, and a flair for new and original styles.

But by the time Tony called for her, promptly at seven, Ellen had tucked all the glamour from sight. She looked plainer than ever in an adolescent-looking pleated skirt and sweater, and only the merest trace of pink lipstick on her scrubbed face.

"Oh, Tony, I'm all ready," she exclaimed brightly. "I'm so excited that I—" And then she stopped, gazing, wide-eyed, at the slim, beautiful girl at Tony's side. Mrs. Bartley was right, she thought fleetingly. The girl's blonde beauty, emphasized by the stark white evening gown she wore, did have an iceberg-like quality. For a moment her blue-green eyes looked searchingly at Ellen's flushed face, and then she said with a certain hauteur, "But Tony, darling, the child isn't even dressed!"

"Dressed? Why, of course I'm dressed." Ellen giggled. "This is my best sweater. I thought it would be the very thing to wear to places like the Flea Circus and Coney Island and the Staten Island Ferry."

"Flea Circus? Coney Island?" Cynthia Ingram looked startled. "Tony, don't tell me you had that in mind!"

"But he promised me a big night out," Ellen murmured sweetly, "and those are things I've looked forward to seeing for ever so long. Of course, if you'd rather not go—"

"Of course we'll go," Tony said, after an awkward pause. "If that's your idea of fun, Ellen, then you're going to have an evening you'll never forget."

For a moment, Cynthia seemed to stiffen, and there were spark of anger in her eyes. Then, forcing a smile, she said, "In that case, do you mind if I powder my nose and comb my hair, Ellen? I always like to look my best at Coney Island."

WITHOUT waiting for a reply, she brushed past Ellen and walked into the bedroom, closing the door after her. What had she expected to happen, Ellen wondered with mixed emotions. Cynthia to refuse to show a country girl a night out in the big city? A scene that would convince Tony he was making a dreadful mistake?

If that's what she hoped for, Ellen was doomed for disappointment, for when Cynthia returned she was even more gracious than before. She actually smiled at Ellen as she said, "On second thought, Tony, perhaps you'd better drive me back home so I can change to something more suitable for doing the town. Ellen looked so simple and sweet in her little costume—I'm positively envious."

That was only the beginning. As the evening wore on, Cynthia's friendliness increased. It was she who insisted trying all the games of chance at Coney Island and garnering an armload of gaudy prizes. It was Cynthia who suggested mak-

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ing a tour of the city, later, on a sightseeing bus. And, when it was very late, it was Cynthia's bright idea to stop at a shabby little hole-in-the-wall for hamburgers and steaming cups of coffee.

"Perhaps you were wrong about her after all, Mother Bartley," Ellen wrote home, after Cynthia and Tony had left her at her hotel promising to see her the next day. "Instead of treating me as I'd expected—like an unattractive little nuisance cluttering up their lives—Cynthia couldn't have been more charming. Even when Tony and I talked about old times in Stanton City, she seemed as interested as anyone could be. If that's true, then we're making a dreadful mistake and Tony has every right to be in love with her."

Ellen gazed down at those words bleakly. It had taken courage to write that last line, she thought. She hadn't dreamed that seeing Tony again would evoke such a tide of memories or fill her with this queer sense of longing. I can't be in love with him, she told herself firmly. I won't let myself fall in love with him. We're just good friends—and I'm here only because I promised his mother I'd do what I could to see that Cynthia is the right girl for him. Certainly that isn't love—

But it was love. Deep down inside her, Ellen knew it. She had wanted to see Tony again, that's the reason she was here—why she had been willing to embark on such a fantastic scheme. Inwardly, she had hoped from the very first that Tony's mother was right—that Cynthia wasn't the girl for him and Tony would discover it in time. And now that it appeared she was wrong and Tony had every reason to be in love with Cynthia, Ellen's heart felt dangerously near breaking.

The next day proved even worse. Ellen ate a solitary breakfast in her room because she hated to go out in public wearing her little-girl clothes, yet she was afraid of being seen looking like herself. Shortly before noon, Cynthia and Tony appeared—Tony big and grinning and disturbingly handsome; Cynthia breathtakingly beautiful in a sophisticated suit and flawless accessories.

"I've nothing on my hands today but time," Tony explained with a grin. "Time to devote to my two favorite women. What'll it be today, Ellen?"

She faltered, conscious of Cynthia's quizzical smile, "Well, perhaps I'd better not say. After all, Cynthia may have plans of her own, and—"

"Nonsense, darling," the blonde answered sweetly. "You're our guest, remember? And there'll be plenty of time for my plans after you have to go back home."

Tony chuckled. "Isn't she wonderful, Ellen? Just between you and me, she cancelled a luncheon and two cocktail parties with some of her friends, so we could do the town."

"Our friends, darling," Cynthia corrected him gently. "They're your friends now, too. Remember?"

Ellen held her breath then for a long moment. Did she only imagine that a shadow flitted briefly across Tony's dark face, that something about Cynthia's casual reminder made him stiffen?

"Of course—our friends, Cynthia," Tony said dutifully, and Ellen's heart sank to her toes.

WHEN she read off the list she'd made hurriedly—Grant's Tomb, Staten Island, Rockefeller Center, Cynthia supplied a few suggestions, too, such as the Metropolitan Museum, the top of the Empire State Building. "We don't want you to miss a thing while you're here," she said sweetly. "That way you'll have such pleasant memories when you go back home, won't she, Tony darling?"

"Of course." He looked grave. "Memories can be pretty important now and then."

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That was how they spent their day, rushing from one spot to another, stopping for a hurried lunch, then dashing on again. It was fun, of course. Tony was gay and charming, he kept Ellen weak with laughter with his garbled descriptions of New York's scenic wonders. At least, Ellen reflected wistfully, it could have been fun—for two. A threesome made things a bit confusing. It was Ellen whom Tony teased and cajoled just as he had back home in Stanton City, but it was Cynthia who held his hand, who smiled into his eyes, who made it obvious, always, that Tony belonged to her.

They're right for each other, his mother was wrong, Ellen thought ruefully, when they were en route to the zoo, several hours later. I've made a nuisance of myself, cluttering up their lives.

Then, strangely enough, something happened at the zoo that made Ellen begin to hope again. Munching popcorn and peanuts, they strolled along slowly, gazing at the animals, and Tony said, "Ellen, have you noticed how much some of these animals resemble people we know back home? For instance, that ferocious-looking lion we just passed looked a lot like Theodore Crabtree, the high school principal, and the penguins remind me of the waiters out at the country club and that seal, diving for fish, looks for all the world like—"

"Like J. G. Holland, the newspaper publisher," Ellen finished for him swiftly. "I was thinking the same thing. You know, Tony, he's always hoped you'd come back to Stanton City to stay."

"Who does—the seal?"

"Of course not, idiot—I mean J. G.," Ellen retorted. "He's always said that he was taking over the newspaper after your father's death, only until you could return to publish it yourself. It's always been your mother's wish, too, to see you carry on in your father's place."

"I know." Tony frowned. "I've thought a lot about it, Ellen. When I first came to New York, it was because I felt I needed more experience before taking on the responsibility. Now—"

"Now the job is still there, ready and waiting for you." Ellen took a quick breath. "You've always liked Stanton City, haven't you, Tony? Its people are friendly and generous and kind. But it needs young men with courage and initiative. Oh, Tony, I—" She stopped abruptly, noticing for the first time, the set look on Cynthia's lovely face.

"It's ridiculous," Cynthia declared bluntly. "Simply ridiculous. Tony, you know we came to a decision about the newspaper business long ago."

"And what was your decision, Tony?" Ellen murmured softly. But before Tony could frame a reply, it was Cynthia who said:

"Tony is going to work for my father. He'll have a secure future and a comfortable salary. Our future is nicely planned." Then, because there was a surprisingly grim look about Tony's mouth, a watchful look on Ellen's face, Cynthia forced a smile.

"Oh, come now—here we are talking about things that can't possibly concern Ellen. I'm sure she'd much rather be enjoying herself. Where would you like to go now, Ellen?"

"I'd like to go back to my hotel," Ellen answered flatly. "I—I'm not feeling very well," she added, seeing Tony's surprised look. It was true, she thought, as they rode toward her hotel. She didn't feel well at all. All too clearly now she could see what Tony's mother had known at once—that Cynthia was a cold and clever woman who intended to have her own way about everything.

APPARENTLY Cynthia was sure of her own victory, because she remained in the taxi while Tony accompanied Ellen inside her hotel. It was only

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the second time they had been alone together since she arrived, Ellen reflected, and probably it would be the last. She said, "I'm going home tonight, Tony."

"Tonight! But isn't that rather sudden? You told me you might stay for the wedding."

Inwardly, she winced at the word, but she managed a faint smile. "I was only teasing, Tony. Actually, I think I've made a nuisance of myself long enough. You and Cynthia have so much to do, so—so many plans to m-make—" She faltered a little, but Tony didn't seem to notice.

"You aren't a nuisance, Ellen," he answered. "It was like old times, seeing you again. You made me remember a lot of things I thought I'd forgotten." Without warning then, he bent and kissed her—a gentle, almost wistful kiss that might have been intended for her cheek, but that found her lips, instead. A kiss that seemed to cling tenderly, for a long, bittersweet moment.

Afterward, Ellen wondered dreamily if she had only imagined the intensity of that caress. There was nothing in Tony's manner to indicate that it had meant anything important to him. He said, "I'll take you to the train tonight, Ellen," and she answered, just as evenly, "It isn't necessary, Tony. Good-by—good luck." She turned away quickly, so he wouldn't see the tears that rose to her eyes, and then she had gone quickly across the lobby, her head averted so Tony wouldn't see her lips trembling with repressed sobs.

She had scarcely reached her room before someone rapped on the door and her heartbeats quickened. Was it Tony? But when she opened the door her heart sank. Cynthia was standing on the threshold, looking as beautiful and serene as though they hadn't spent the entire day sightseeing.

"Tony tells me you're going home tonight," she said. "I sent him on without me so I could come back to say good-by."

"I see. Very well then—good-by." Ellen knew she was rude but she didn't care. Cynthia's smug, self-assuredness was suddenly more than she could take.

As though guessing her thoughts, Cynthia said lightly, "You can relax and be yourself now, Ellen, since your little scheme didn't work."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this country bumpkin act of yours. It didn't fool me for a second. At least," she amended, "not after I caught a glimpse of the gorgeous gowns in your closet and the fancy cosmetics in your train case."

"But how did you—"

"How did I discover your deep dark secret?" Cynthia smiled evenly. "Frankly, I was skeptical the minute you turned up looking like anything but a cover girl. I was positive girls didn't look that drab even in Stanton City, unless it's intentional. A peek in your closet on the pretext of powdering my nose confirmed it."

"I see," Ellen murmured dully. "Then if you knew that I'm—that I wasn't what I pretended to be, why did you let me go through with it?"

"I was curious to see just how far you would go." Cynthia was blunt. "I found out today. You and Tony's mother dreamed up a very neat scheme for persuading him to give up his city ways and go back to hibernate in that dreary little town. Obviously, you realized your small-town brand of glamour wouldn't work, so you resorted to looking big-eyed and naive instead. That's why I played along with you—because it was the last thing you expected. Now, you must have begun to realize that Tony is satisfied with the way we've planned his future."

"You mean the way you've planned it."

Cynthia shrugged. "Have it your way, darling. At any rate, you failed except in one way."

"Yes?"

"If you wanted Tony to remember his

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small-town girlfriend as a drab little character, you certainly succeeded."

After she'd gone, the hotel suite seemed haunted by the ghost of her mocking laughter. Fighting against tears of humiliation, Ellen tossed her belongings into her bags, eager to get away as quickly as possible. Even though it was several hours before a train was due that would take her back to Stanton City, she called for a taxi and checked out of the hotel.

Cynthia was right, she had failed in everything except making a ridiculous spectacle of herself. Now, she realized, when Tony did think of her—if ever he did, she amended hastily—he would recall a plain, tiresome girl.

SOMEHOW, time passed at the station. An hour went by, two hours. And then her train was called and Ellen rose from her seat, reached for her bags. This time tomorrow, she would be home again, she was thinking, and the whole crazy plan would be over. But, she knew it would never be forgotten. As long as she lived, she would remember the set of Tony's broad shoulders, the blueness of his eyes, the way the corners of his mouth quirked upward when he was amused. The memory of him was so vivid that it seemed almost as though she could see him now.

And then Ellen's eyes widened incredulously. She did see him! Tony was striding through the station with long, purposeful steps. He beckoned to her, the dear, familiar grin on his face. "Ellen, Ellen—wait! I had a devil of a time getting here through the traffic. I was afraid I might be too late." He grabbed her hands and clung to them as he looked over his shoulder. "Where the devil is that redcap, anyway. He has my bags—I tossed them to him when I got out of the cab. If he doesn't hurry along, we'll miss the train."

"Your bags? We'll miss the train?" she echoed a little dazedly. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"It's really very simple." He grinned down at her. "I'm going back to Stanton City with you."

"Going back! But your wedding—" she cried.

"There isn't going to be a wedding after all." He looked sober. "At least, not with Cynthia. I've been doing a lot of thinking since you arrived in New York, Ellen. Through you, I recalled a lot of memories of people and surroundings I'd tried to pretend weren't important to me anymore. That trip to the zoo was the pay-off. Maybe some of those folks back home wouldn't appreciate being likened to lions and penguins, but at least they made me realize I don't belong here, after all. I'm going back home, and if J. G. will have me, I'm going back to publish the newspaper, too."

"I see. And Cynthia? Will she come to Stanton City later?"

"She's staying here in Manhattan where she belongs. She gave me a choice, said I couldn't have her and a newspaper job, too. When I told her I was making up my own mind from now on, she walked out of the picture." Tony chuckled. "Confidentially, I'm glad things worked out this way. I'll admit that for awhile I was a gone guy where Cynthia was concerned, and before I knew it myself, I'd agreed to everything she wanted. But after awhile I began to have a few doubts—and when you came back into my life, I was sure I'd made a mistake. Oh, Ellen, I know it's too soon for me to say this, but when you stepped off the train, looking so little and lovely and adorable—"

"Lovely! Adorable!" She gasped. "But I'm not! I mean, I wasn't. I mean—I was trying to look like a typical country cousin and make such a nuisance of myself that Cynthia would forget her poise for a moment and you'd see what she was really like." Ellen's eyes widened. "Tony, didn't

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Cynthia tell you anything about me?"

"She mentioned that you were pretending to be something you weren't, but I told her she was insane. You could never be anything but what you are—sweet and gay and sincere."

"But the way I acted, Tony—like a regular country bumpkin seeing the town—"

"It was fun, wasn't it?" His eyes were smiling. "Every minute of it. Seeing Manhattan with you was a lot more exciting than first nights and cocktail parties ever were with Cynthia."

"But the way I looked. I—" She touched her smart hat, took a quick glance at her sophisticated suit. She'd dressed smartly for her return trip home, never dreaming that she'd be seeing Tony again. Now, she said, "Tony look at me. Don't you notice anything at all different about me?"

He looked at her quizzically. "Hmnn. You have your hair a different way, and that's a new hat you're wearing, isn't it? Except for that, I don't see anything different. You look just as lovely and sweet and desirable as you ever did to me." He grinned. "I hope I haven't said anything wrong."

"Wrong!" Tears started to her eyes, but this time they were tears of happiness. "You've said something right," she answered. "I thought you'd always remember me as being plain and awkward and dull, but you didn't even notice those things. Oh, Tony, without putting it into those three little words, what you've just said is more than enough proof that you love me."

"Yes, I do," he answered gravely. "I guess I always have. I know now I always will." He drew her into his arms and held her close. "And as long as we're on the subject," he whispered, "there's still another way to tell you—like this." With that he kissed her ardently.

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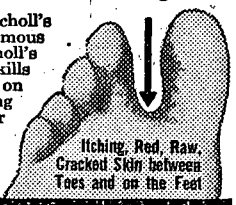

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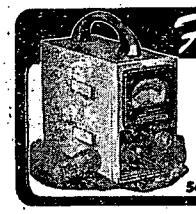

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(Continued from page 43)

Artie Shipman? You seemed pretty stuck on—"

"Artie's a very nice guy!" she flared defensively. "It just so happens that Laura's in love with him." She paused. "And he's in love with Laura." Another pause. A longer one. And then a smile blossomed. "Oh, Quinn, he never knew he was in love with her until you brought them together the other night. And now everything's wonderful between them. Artie was just another date to me."

She stopped. "Quinn," she murmured, "I'm sorry. Are you? I asked Laura to arrange things so that I could see you again—"

"Mmmph!" The cotton had once more been thrust into his mouth.

"We'll have you fixed up in no time," Dr. Fisk said.

"Doctor," Joyce said lazily. "If a woman were outside in the reception room, holding two teeth in her hand, don't you think she ought to be looked at right away?"

He stared at her. "Good heavens, yes! Why didn't you tell me so before. Outside, did you say?"

"Angel—" Quinn warned.

She nodded.

"Don't go away, young man. I'll be right back." Dr. Fisk leaped for the door.

Before Quinn could maneuver out of the chair, Joyce was parked happily in his lap.

"Hurry up," she whispered. "The nurse is in on the conspiracy, but he isn't."

"I'm hurrying," Quinn said, and bent his head and found her clinging lips.

"Mmmm," she murmured. "Nice."

"Sure beats rhubarb growing," he said and kissed her again, nice and unhurriedly.

The door opened.

"There's nobody—" Dr. Fisk began. He closed it. Softly.

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(Continued from page 75)

two of them in rapture and where nothing else mattered.

His hands tightened bruisingly on her arms. "Don't kiss me like that. Don't do it. Unless you mean it. There's a limit to the amount of heartbreak a guy can take."

All at once, warmth flooded Lorraine's heart, golden warmth. They had it back, their lost treasure, their lost love. And she must never let them lose it again.

"Oh, Terry," she said, almost stammering in her eagerness, "I think I've been terribly wrong. I fell in love with one man and then I tried to change you into another person entirely."

"And I loved you so much I tried to change," she said.

"I can see it now," she said. "I nearly wrecked your career and our marriage and everything. How can you ever forgive me?"

"Forgive, darling? When a man loves a woman the way I love you, there's never anything to forgive. Except to try to forgive myself for not knowing I could only live and work in my own way and insisting we do it that way so we could both be happy."

She looked up at him, her eyes starry-bright. "I'll never interfere again," she vowed. "Live your own crazy, wonderful life. And I'll live it with you."

"And I'll write a hundred hits now," Terry said. "All of them love songs. To you."

"The next time I get married," she said unsteadily. "Oh, Terry, all the times I get married will always be to you."

Then his arms were a circle of bliss and glorious heart-pounding happiness. A circle she would never leave again, Lorraine knew, as she kissed Terry back, every kiss a promise of love and happiness.

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(Continued from page 97)

Joella was right, Carol thought staring with revulsion into Stan's flushed, damp face. His eyes were too pale a blue, too close together. His mouth was loose and slack. He was selfish—oh, Stan was horrible!

She took her purse, rose, trying to be calm.

"I'll call Mrs. Dollar, tell her I'll be late." She smiled shakily. "Wait here."

There was a telephone in the entrance hall, she remembered. On the way she saw the manager, a burly, greasy-haired man with lumpy shoulders.

"I want to get away from my escort," she breathed swiftly. "If you could keep him at his table while I call a taxi—"

"He's a pretty good spender, kid. The good customers are always right in this place." The opaque black eyes raked her. "Besides you take pretty fair care of yourself in the hot spots in L. A. Guess you'll make out okay here." He sauntered away, laughing.

On shaking legs, Carol walked to the phone booth. She would call a taxi. But as she pulled the door shut, she saw Stan lurch toward the booth. He hammered on the glass, shouted at her.

"Hard to get, are you? That's what you think!"

No, not the taxi. He could follow the taxi. With icy hands she dropped a coin in the telephone, got the operator.

"Get me Burt Brooks, at the Los Angeles *Gazette*," she stammered. "If he isn't there, make them tell you where he is. It's important."

SHE hung up, leaned weakly against the wall, braced her feet against the booth door. If the operator found Burt right away, he could be here in two hours. She could stay in this hot, smelly little phone booth that long. She could stay there forever rather than come out

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and be pawed over by Stan Pollard.

It seemed ages before the phone rang.

"I am unable to contact your party direct," the operator said. "His paper will try to get in touch with him. I'll call you back."

"I'll wait."

"I can hold out as long as you can, Toots." Stan grinned from outside the booth, and leaned against the tiny structure.

Carol cried. She had never been really frightened before in her life, but she was now. Desperately frightened. The manager of this place was a beast, Stan was no better. Stan—the nice boy she had gone to school with! Stan, the boy she knew so well!

She mopped her eyes, her hot face, and thought longingly of the blessed sense of safety she had felt in Burt's arms when he'd held her, told her he loved her. Why hadn't she said, "I love you, Burt." She knew now that it would have been true.

Carol never knew how long she cowered in the telephone booth, but at last she heard a murmur of male voices. A group of extremely large men entered the. Jack o' Lantern's door—they weren't in uniform but she had a fleeting, reassuring impression they were police. And with them—was Burt!

She opened the booth door, darted out into the cool air of the lobby, sped to him like an arrow.

"Burt!" she stammered almost hysterically. "Stan—I've been in the phone booth for hours—I tried to get you at the paper—Stan wanted—"

Burt gave her a brief hug, then stepped past her.

"You've been bothering my girl?" he asked ominously.

Stan grinned foolishly. "Your girl and who else's?"

He said no more because Burt's fist

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cracked against his jaw. He stumbled back against the booth, slid down its length, and sat on the floor, glassy-eyed and dazed.

"Make your raid," Burt told the big men with him. "I'll write my story from the dope you give me later. Come on, Carol. The Jack o' Lantern is no place for a nice girl."

Burt's car was parked at the lookout space where they had parked before. Carol was in Burt's arms snug and secure.

"I was going to let another guy handle this story," he said, "but somehow I had to come back. I had to convince you that you didn't hate me. When you weren't at your rooming house or the Country Club with your precious Stan, I had a hunch he might have brought you here. I figured that he might have convinced you by that alone that he was a heel who didn't give a hoot for you. Oh, darling, I'd like to go back and hit him again! I love you so, Carol."

"It's all over." She sighed and snuggled closer. "I love you, too, Burt. I think I started loving you the very minute I first saw you." She laughed shakily. "Of course, our marriage will provide a huge slice of gossip for Valley Vista. Girl Caught in Raid on Gambling Joint—oh, my, I can hear them now. They'll be busy for years with gossip."

"Who cares," Burt whispered against her fragrant hair. "We'll get married and never come back again."

"We'll get married," Carol agreed happily. "But we'll come back to Valley Vista often. I want my home town to know what a nice young man that nice girl, Carol Shannon, married. And what a nice family they are raising."

And with his firm, sweet kiss on her mouth, her heart knew very surely that little scandals die quickly, but love never dies.

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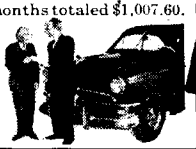

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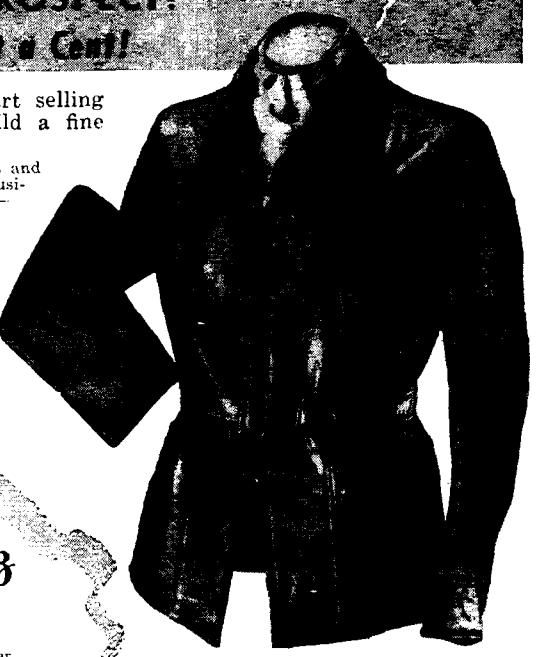

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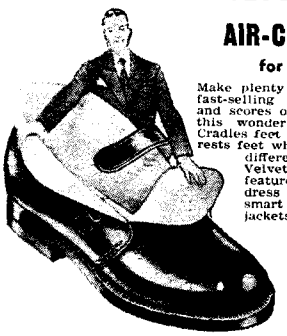

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